

The background of the cover features a male character with brown hair and a red scarf, and a female character with white hair in a maid outfit. They are standing in a grassy field under a blue sky with clouds. The title 'Magical★Explorer' is written in large, stylized pink letters, with a black star replacing the dot in 'Magical'.

Magical★Explorer

2

Reborn as a
Side Character
in a Fantasy Dating Sim

Iris

ILLUSTRATION BY
Noboru Kannatuki









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Iris
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Magical★Explorer: Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim, Vol. 2

Iris

Translation by David Musto

Cover art by Noboru Kannatuki

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MAGICAL★EXPLORER Vol.2 ERO GAME NO YUJIN KYARA NI TENSEI SHITAKEDO, GAME CHISHIKI TSUKATTE JIYUNI IKIRU

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Characters



Kaitani Takaoka

1990-03-10

Actor

1990-03-10



Kaitani Takaoka

1990-03-10

Actor

1990-03-10



Kaitani Takaoka

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The Student Council is responsible for the overall management of the University and the Board of Directors is responsible for the overall management of the University.

Faculty Council

The Faculty Council is responsible for the overall management of the University and the Board of Directors is responsible for the overall management of the University.

Administrative Council

The Administrative Council is responsible for the overall management of the University and the Board of Directors is responsible for the overall management of the University.

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Yen Newsletter

Illustration: Noboru Kannatuki

Graphic Design: Kai Sugiyama (Tsuyoshi Kusano Design Co., Ltd.)



CONFIG

“Honestly! Why in the world did you two do that?!”

“Sorry... The gate was closed, so we jumped over it...,” Iori Hijiri, the protagonist of *Magical ★Explorer*, replied as he slumped his shoulders dejectedly.

Considering his initial hesitation about getting caught and yelled at when I’d pushed him into jumping the school gate, I couldn’t really blame him for being discouraged. I mean, it was my fault.

“Um, Teach? Can you let him off the hook? I was the one who pressured him into doing it.”

I was 100 percent the instigator here. I would need to apologize properly to him later.

Running her fingers through her light-pink hair, Ms. Ruija dubiously scanned me from top to bottom as I pleaded Iori’s case.

“While I agree that he seems to regret his actions...do you? Are you sorry about doing this?”

“Why, but of course.”

Since I replied with a shrug, my words had the opposite effect. She sized me up like an untrustworthy solicitor.

“Hmm, are you really...? What’s your name, then?”

“I’m Kousuke Takioto. You might have been notified about me already.”

Ms. Ruija cocked her head to the side at the word *notified*. Then, recalling something, she quickly broke into a smile.

“Oh, so *you’re* Kousuke, hmm? ♪ Yes, yes, I’ve heard about you. If you’re late... Wait a second, then why in the world were *you* jumping the gate?!”

A perfectly astute observation.

Should I try to play it off with some boneheaded explanation like, *Well, when life gives you gates...?* Maybe I could give it to her straight and admit that I was hoping she’d scold me for it. The choice was between coming off as incredibly bizarre or incredibly perverted... Were there any other bright ideas I could come up with in my defense?

“Hmmm. Blah. Fine, fine, I’ll drop it... Do you both know where you need to go?”

“Well, I hate to say this, but I actually don’t.”

“You being here makes that clear, I guess... I’ll give you a simple explanation, then.”

After she finished giving us directions, the pink-haired teacher departed, looking slightly worn out.

Although she’d certainly gotten upset at me, my joy at being able to meet her far outweighed any of my other feelings.

Essentially, I was experiencing a mixture of two conflicting emotions: surface-level guilt from being told off along with an uncanny ecstasy welling up from deep inside me.

That’s right, the well-trained gentlemen perverts out there could even derive pleasure from abuse. Not that I would ever be able to admit to that out loud.

I glanced over at Iori to find him despondent from Ms. Ruija’s tongue-lashing. I, on the other hand, was having the exact opposite reaction, growing happier as I reflected back on it.

That being said, I did feel a slight pang of guilt for sacrificing him for the sake of my own pleasure.

“Sorry for dragging you into this.”

“Huh? Oh. I don’t really mind. It’s okay.”

Are you sure about that? I couldn’t help but be a bit suspicious of his answer.

I turned my attention away from Iori, and the school building came into view.

Inside the towering institution was Ludie, plus Yukine and the other heroines, too.

Images of all the different women flooded into my mind before I came to my senses, and I caught my chest swelling with excitement.

“Man, I can’t wait... Aren’t you pumped, Iori?”

“Pumped?”

“Yeah, see, I’m so ridiculously hyped.”

Taking a look at the Academy and imagining all the different girls in my mind filled me with both anticipation and determination.

“I mean, just think about it—this moment right here marks the beginning of our lives at Tsukuyomi Magic Academy.”

Each student probably had their own distinct reasons for coming here. Probably different aspirations, too. If they were working toward any goals, this was their first step toward achieving them.

“Truth is, I came here with a huge objective in mind, the kind that would sound nutty and impossible to any normal person out there.”

Here at Tsukuyomi Magic Academy, countless students pressed forward on the road to pursuing their ambitions. For most, it was their

initial foray into becoming magic-users. For others, it was their springboard to a life as adventurers. And for some, it could even be what pushed them into becoming researchers.

But for me, this was my first step to becoming the strongest in the world.

The crucial opening chapter in my journey to bring everyone happiness.

There would be some huge obstacles in my way from here on out. Mountain-high barriers, even. Not just Mount Fuji-level impediments, either; we're talking hurdles as high as Everest. In fact, I probably wouldn't be able to cross over them without breaking into the stratosphere.

At the end of the day, though, all I needed to do was overcome them. Moments ago, I had leaped over the gate and set foot into the Academy. It didn't matter if my steps forward were the kind most people would never take. Even if, for example, I got yelled at, or my image was tarnished, it didn't matter to me either way. I was going to become the strongest for Ludie, for Yukine, for all the heroines' sakes.

"What about you? You came here with an end goal in mind, right?"

"Well... I do have some purpose, I suppose."

Whoops, I might have asked that prematurely. This guy hasn't experienced anything at the Academy yet. At this point, there's no way he'll give any of the responses I want to hear.

"Ah, shoot, sorry. Probably not anything you're gonna want to talk about to a dude you just met, huh?"

"No, it's fine. I think I sort of understand what you're trying to say, though."

Iori gazed at the Academy with an earnest expression as he replied. Watching him, I thought back to our first meeting at the school gate.

"You know, I feel like destiny is sort of at play here."

"Destiny?"

I nodded toward Iori looking back at me.

"That's right, fate. Starting from today, I'm gonna be charging headfirst down my path to become the strongest. And when I do, I get this feeling like you'll be running right there with me, only for you to block my path right there at the finish line, and... Hey, c'mon now, don't look at me so seriously like that. You're making me feel kinda embarrassed. You gotta do more to set the mood if you're gonna confess your feelings like this."

"H-hold on now, I'm not confessing at all! If anything, aren't you the one confessing here, Takioto?!"

"Ha-ha, no worries. I just kinda started to feel a bit self-conscious. By the way, feel free to call me by my first name, Kousuke, instead."

I held out my hand, and he brought his to meet it.

“Counting on you, buddy.”

“...Yeah. I hope we’ll get along, Kousuke.”

His gaze shifted to me as I turned toward the Academy.

“All right, I guess it’s time to get going. Since we’re both here, what do you say we take our first step together?”

“Together? Sure, I guess.”

“Perfect. Okay, here we go. One, two...”

I made a long stride forward. Iori made a smaller one. We both took our first steps into the Academy.

I’d finally arrived.

At the main stage of *Magical ★Explorer*—Tsukuyomi Magic Academy.

Most often, video game protagonists tend to either be troublemakers themselves or constantly end up in trouble.

The reason was obvious. If this weren’t the case, then the story would become bland and monotonous. Though playing a game where the protagonist simply passes through a straightforward life without any twists or turns might be fun at first, I would probably come to my senses eventually and wonder what the hell I’d been doing with my time.

Magical ★Explorer is no exception to this rule. The protagonist, Iori, naturally finds himself caught up in all sorts of situations.

I brought my hands up to the magic circle beside the handle to the classroom door instead of the latch itself. At that, the symbol shone with a bright light, and the entrance slowly slid open. The teacher was the first to look our way. Then the other eyes in the classroom all turned toward us.

“I’m sorry we’re late.”

“I’ve heard. Takioto and Hijiri, right? Take your seats.”

It appeared our desks were assigned according to our names. As I started to move toward my assigned seat, I realized Ludie was there as well.

She emphatically moved her lips. I assumed she was scolding me about being late or something along those lines. I mean, I did message her about it...

The moment I reached my place and began to greet a no-name NPC I’d locked eyes with, a shout echoed from behind me.

“Hey! You’re that pervert from earlier!”

“Wait, you’re that girl from this morning!”

One of the female students and our illustrious protagonist, Iori Hijiki, were pointing at each other. *Looks like the collision event this*

morning went off without a hitch.

In *Magical ★Explorer*, there's an extremely easy method of distinguishing main characters from the so-called no-name characters that drift along without impacting the narrative. You simply have to examine their outfits.

In the game, the extras and the protagonist wear the exact same uniform. On the other hand, with very few exceptions, most characters involved in the plot at any level have some sort of eye-catching accessory.

Take Kousuke Takioto, for example. This perpetually unfortunate comic relief character has quite a flashy fashion sense. Likewise, Ludivine Marie-Ange de la Tréfle—the second daughter to the Tréfle Emperor, a beautiful elf who goes by Ludie—wears an entirely different outfit, along with a unique set of earrings.



With that in mind, what do you think is up with the girl arguing with Iori? That's right—one glance at her intentionally skimpy uniform tells you that she's a main character.

"Hey, there was a nice, thick layer of butter on that piece of toast! You'd better make it up to me!"

"Wait, but didn't *you* bump into *me*?!"

Since I'd beat *Magical ★Explorer* more times than I could remember, there was no way I wouldn't recognize this girl. She's a rare breed in our modern age: an honest-to-goodness beautiful schoolgirl who runs to her first day of class with a piece of toast in her mouth. Not only that, but this beautiful schoolgirl *also* bumps into the protagonist on her way there, sending her breakfast plummeting from her mouth. And to top it all off, she causes these sorts of accidents—tragedies?—where her skirt flips up in the wind, and Iori's head gets shoved between her legs. Although you could say that sexy "accidents" are also situations that happen all the time in *eroge*.

Anyway, main heroine Rina Katou was still quarreling with Iori, with immense frustration at that.

"And on top of that...you took a good long look, didn't you?! You shameless perv!"

"Y-y-you've got it all wrong! I didn't see anything at all, I swear!"

If things had played out as they do in-game, this was a lie. Iori definitely gets a good look. Even now, I could clearly recall the image of her panties in all of their striped glory.

"Quiet down!"

The teacher gave the final word and settled their dispute. As I shot a backward glance toward the admonished duo, I called out to the no-name character seated behind me.

"Hey, are we already done with introductions?"

The answer was no, apparently. Then I tried to initiate a casual conversation with Max, the pink-haired Juliana, and the chestnut-haired Nicoletta. For some reason, however, they were all cold and standoffish toward me.

After homeroom and the self-introductions came to an end, there was a simple seating shuffle. This was so students with poor eyesight could receive priority seating at the front of the room. Most of the newly enrolled students were bubbling with motivation, so the majority didn't want to be in the back.

The teacher had made lots to draw for the front and rear rows, and since I didn't really care where I sat, I drew from the unpopular back-row lots. Both Ludie and Iori drew from there as well.

The desk listed on my lot was, funnily enough, the same one it had been in the game. The golden spot in the very back next to the window, where you could sleep without getting caught...was right

behind me. That was where Iori would sit. It sort of felt right to see the protagonist there.

Additionally, his neighbor also remained unchanged from the game.

“Wha—?!”

“Huh?!”

Iori and the toast-eating young girl, Rina Katou, one of the heavenly main heroines, whom the esteemed fans of *MX* had nicknamed Katorina, stared at each other. Then they both averted their gazes in unison and took their seats. The sighs of exhaustion they each gave as they plopped down were so incredibly in sync that I couldn’t stop myself from snickering. A glare from Katorina quickly shut me up, though.

Just as I hypothesized that some unknown force was compelling everyone into the same seats as their game counterparts, my theory was dashed.

“Why, good day.”

“Good day, Ludie.”

The elf who had become a recent fixture in my daily life approached the desk in front of mine and greeted me apathetically. I replied with a “good day” of my own; this was the second time I’d used the phrase in my entire life.

During the previous night’s Hanamura house dinner, she’d declared that she was going to hide her true personality while at school, and it was clear now she’d been serious.

In-game, Ludie is very frank toward men and treats them with cold detachment. However, I’d already dealt with the event that created this icy demeanor of hers, so I had no idea why she was keeping it up... If I got the chance, I would be sure to ask her about it later.

“Good day. I hope we’ll get along.”

She greeted the no-name girl seated next to her with a smile. The no-name boy in front of her sat with a dumbfounded expression across his face, as though the elf’s smile had knocked him out.

While watching her give him an uninterested greeting, I remembered something from the game:

Her arrival as a student is supposed to come later. Normally, her desk gets placed behind the protagonist’s.

“I can’t believe I have Ludie seated in front of me...”

She must have heard me as I murmured that to myself, because she turned around to face me with a grin—though her eyes definitely weren’t doing the same.

“Oh? Dissatisfied to have me here, then?”

I shook my head.

“No, no, if anything, I was hoping and praying for such an outcome. In addition to being able to gaze upon Your beautiful Highness at all

times, I can request instruction from your most erudite self. But above all..."

I then leaned in closer and whispered in her ear.

"...It'll be easier to invite you out to grab some ramen on our way home from school."

Naturally, I spoke these words in a low voice so that our peers wouldn't overhear. I didn't really think it was anything to get embarrassed about, but she was still self-conscious.

"...Dummy," she whispered in a hushed voice, as if she was heaving a sigh. No one else besides me could have heard it.

"Okay, everyone in their seats?"

At the teacher's words, we all went quiet and faced forward. We were about to be given a tour of the Academy.

The entrance ceremony and school tour over, we received a simple explanation of our coursework and other housekeeping matters before our first day at the Academy drew to a close. Couldn't expect much more from the first day of class.

Thanks to the tour, my previous worries about getting lost on the Academy campus seemed unfounded. We moved around almost entirely via spatial magic, so as long as I didn't stray anywhere unnecessarily, it would be impossible for me to lose my way.

Additionally, one thing I learned after speaking to a number of people was that they thought I gave off an aloof, hard-to-approach aura. Apparently, my outfit and attitude were a bit *too* free-spirited for some.

"See you tomorrow, Nicoletta, Max, and Juliana."

I could now chat normally with Max and Nicoletta, but Juliana was still a bit standoffish.

Ludie said she was heading home, so I met up with her, and we walked down the cherry-blossomed path that had been so eventful earlier.

"You know...it's still the first day. Aren't you making friends a bit *too* quickly?"

Claris had come to meet Ludie as well. The princess had dropped her aloof act since it was just the three of us.

Her subtle comment made it hard to determine whether she was complimenting me, sulking, or speaking from jealousy.

"Just friendly enough to greet each other, really. Though I'd like to get to know them better eventually."

"It seems like it will be difficult for me... I wonder if I'll be able to find someone I can trust..." Ludie remarked, gazing up absentmindedly at the cherry blossoms.

“Hey now, I definitely trust you, Ludie.”

“I know that, duh. And I...I trust you, too. I meant people besides you.”

In that case, I needed to quickly bond with some trustworthy heroines and introduce them to her. Actually, if I recall correctly, she should become close to some people on her own, with the caveat that she only extends her trust to female students. In fact, she'd had a chance encounter with an upperclassman a year ahead of us, Yukine Mizumori, so the number of people Ludie could place her trust in was already greater than zero.

When we got back to the Hanamuras', one of the beautiful elf maids Ludie had brought from her home country came to receive her. From what I'd heard, they were renting out a nearby house specifically to lodge all her maids. The idea was that they would come over to our place in shifts. I guess Marino and Hatsumi were still both hard at work at the Academy.

Slipping into some casual clothes, I seized the opportunity to prepare my belongings for the next day. But as I stared idly out the window at the clear blue sky, I began to feel it was a bit of a waste not to enjoy the weather, so I instead opted to go on my run a bit earlier than usual.

Despite climbing up the strenuous slope and running around the back of the waterfall to her usual haunt, I couldn't find Yukine anywhere. Then I continued on, turning away from the waterfall and returning to my easier route.

Eventually, I lost track of how many laps I'd made. After I was utterly worn out, I returned to the waterfall to practice my stances, whereupon I glimpsed Yukine swinging her naginata. In an effort not to interrupt her, I trained with my Third and Fourth Hands in an area slightly removed from the body of water.

“How was your first day?” she asked as I stretched out on the bench I'd formed with my stole after I finished my training. Her ponytail was loose and disheveled, and a typically bright smile adorned her face.

“Well...I was late.”

“What? You overslept?”

“No, no, I got caught up helping people on the way, I swear. If someone in front of you was in trouble, you'd stop to help them, right?”

Especially a beautiful woman in trouble. Though unfortunately, it had turned out to be an elderly man this time instead. Yukine pensively nodded, a hand on her chin.

“I can't say that's always true.”

“I know you would. Heck, you've already gotten me out of plenty of jams already.”

Yukine Mizumori had an exemplary sense of justice, even among the other *Magical ★Explorer* characters.

“I was honestly a bit surprised, though. Don’t you think the Academy has a bit *too* many facilities and amenities?”

There was Magic Training Area I, Magic Training Area II, Magic Training Area III, the gym, the secondary gym, Martial Arts Arena I, Martial Arts Arena II, and Martial Arts Arena III. And that wasn’t even taking the colosseum into account, which was large enough to accommodate all the students on campus with room to spare. Beyond all that, there was also what could be described as the Academy’s defining feature—its three dungeons. Not to mention a number of labs open to both students and researchers alike.

“Well, I’d say it’s because there’s a lot of people who come to campus even after graduating, whether that’s for research, the dungeons, or its spatial magic circles. Depending on what path I go down in the future, I might end up back here when I’m no longer a student, too.”

Yukine chuckled, adding, “It’d be more unusual if I *didn’t* end up here after graduating.” I had to admit, the environment at the Academy was, in a word, fantastic.

“I see... Speaking of graduating, is your dungeon diving going well?”

“Yeah, at this rate, I’ll be able to descend to a layer that’ll qualify me for graduation pretty soon. That being said, breaking the Academy’s fastest clear time record will be difficult.”

“I imagine it’ll be that way, since I’ll be the one setting it.”

Yukine grinned as she wiped off her sweat.

“Someone’s confident, huh?” she replied, smacking me on the back. Although she didn’t seem to believe me, I’d meant what I said.

She looked away from me and stared at the ground. Then, heaving a sigh, she looked me straight in the eye with a solemn expression on her face.

“Listen, Takioto, can I tell you something?”

“...What is it?”

“Something serious.”

I could tell as much from the gravity in her eyes.

“First off, let me be clear, it’s not that I have bad feelings about you.”

“...So are you saying you like me, then?”

“M-moron. Didn’t I just tell you this was serious?!”

“Well, personally, I think you’re pretty spec... No, forget it. Sorry.”

Her beet-red cheeks and genuine fluster were wonderful sights to behold. Nevertheless, I decided to hold off on going further. The topic did seem pretty heavy.

“...G-geez. Don’t tease your upperclassman. This is a very important conversation,” she scolded, clearing her throat and pausing for a moment before continuing.

“What do you know?”

I needed some time to interpret what her question meant.

“You mean the incident with Ludie?”

“Broadly speaking...yes. But to be more precise, it’s not just about that, either.”

Even if I knew what she was insinuating, I would need time to digest her words and think over how best to answer her.

From Yukine’s perspective, my actions would undoubtedly come across as exceedingly strange. I was putting my knowledge of *Magical ★Explorer* to use, after all. And I’d given her even more things to mull over during the emergency where Ludie was abducted.

I wonder how she felt at those moments, seeing me bring up outrageous things no one had ever heard about like they were nothing.

I would have liked to explain the truth about everything to her if I could. But was now the best time to tell her? On the other hand, the incident involving Ludie had been serious. All the more reason to...

“Actually, forget it.”

The next words from her mouth weren’t follow-up interrogations into my silence. They were an apology. With a sheepish and gentle smile, Yukine asked my forgiveness.

Looking at her in this moment, I couldn’t help breaking into an awkward smile.

“...When exactly did you start working as a goddess, Yukine?”

“Heh-heh. You say the strangest things... Calling me that would be sacrilege.”

“If you aren’t one, then no one else could ever fit the role.”

Despite her laughter, I personally considered it the sincere truth.

“Sorry. Just a bit curious, that’s all. I know you’re not the type of guy to get wrapped up in any misdeeds. The same was true during Ludie’s emergency.”

“Yukine...”

“I trust you. Really, that’s more than enough.”

This girl really was the Yukine Mizumori I knew and loved. I’d been fond of her from the very start. Yet the more I gleaned about her from our conversations, the more infatuated with her I became.

“There’s absolutely no reason for you to apologize.”

“Takioto?”

“Back then...during the whole thing with Ludie, I’m sure you had some concerns about the way I acted. And I want to talk to you about it. Just a little while later. Can you wait just a bit more?”

“Of course. I figured it was a delicate topic to begin with. I get that

I'm asking about something that's hard to address. But..."

At this, she rested her hand on my shoulder. Her beautifully pale arm, slightly slick with sweat, and her sun-drenched, smiling face—the true definition of a blinding smile—stole my view and bored into my brain.

"Whenever you're ready. I want you to tell me when something comes up. I want to be there to support you."

"Yukine..."

I realized I was still a long way from being able to beat her. But I couldn't let things stay that way.

I took the hand she rested on my shoulder. Then I wrapped both of my own around it.

"Thank you so much, Yukine. And I feel the same way. I've said this before, but I want to support you any way I can."

That's right, I wanted to be there to support her as she wished to grow stronger. I wanted to put her current worries to rest and let her shine ever brighter, as the heroine who can stand shoulder to shoulder with the strongest *Magical ★Explorer* character, Iori, as well as the equally powerful Founding Saint and President Monica.

And then I would surpass them all. To protect everyone.

The Academy's course structure was unique compared with that of the average school.

Mandatory general education classes were held during the morning, while students could take practical curriculum electives in the afternoon. But it wasn't necessarily required for students to attend these classes, either.

Even more surprising was that both these practical courses and mandatory courses were not required credits to advance to the next year's class or graduate. Should a student miss credits from a mandatory class, they could graduate by earning credits in the dungeons. Conversely, even if they missed out on dungeon credits, they could use mandatory course credits to advance to the next year's class or graduate.

"Though that may indeed be the case, it's still not a reason to neglect your mandatory courses. Earning credits from the dungeons is difficult."

While the teacher explained, they wrote out the number sixty.

"The Tsukuyomi Magic Academy Dungeon has sixty layers. These are layers that you, as Academy students, should aim to clear."

Clearing all sixty layers of the Academy's dungeon is one of the requirements for avoiding a bad ending. Additionally, a bad ending is almost guaranteed if the player doesn't clear them all before the

conclusion of their third year; no matter how friendly the player is with the main heroines, he'll get a miserable ending where the protagonist works by himself out on the lonely frontier. Though it must be added that in the ending where the player joins forces with the demons, you're able to avoid being single without needing to clear the sixty layers of the dungeon. If Iori did start heading down that path, however, I would do everything within my power to stop him.

"Only about fifty percent of students complete all sixty layers by the time they graduate in their third year. That means half the class won't clear it in time."

The question now was how long I should wait before setting my sights on the sixtieth layer. If I continued on as though this were a standard, first-time playthrough of the game, I would be able to clear it all by the very start of my second year, or around the end of my first year. But on New Game+, I would be able to reach the end on my first descent into the labyrinth. If I was going to surpass the protagonist, I wanted to clear it all before the end of my first year at the latest.

However, my goal wasn't simply to surpass the protagonist. It was to have each heroine reach her happy ending. I couldn't lose sight of my ultimate objective. With that in mind, I had to conquer the Tsukuyomi Magic Academy Dungeon during my first year.

No—when I considered all the heroines, I actually needed to plan to complete all the main events by the end of the school year.

"There are some who plan on becoming researchers from the start who aren't concerned with clearing the sixty layers at all. Even if you are in that position, however, I believe it's best to aim for the final floor. There are many things you can gain from dungeon delving that can't be gleaned from your research here," the teacher insisted, putting her pen down and looking over the students.

"Basically, I'm telling you to try to get a handle on both sides of school life. In an ideal world, you would get a passing grade across the board. That will give you a leg up when it comes time to find a job. In fact, you'll need achievements in both disciplines if you want to join the Magic Knight Corps. You've been warned."

Leaning on the window, I sneaked a peek over at Iori. No number of looks did anything to improve his lackluster eroge protagonist face. He was diligently listening to the teacher's every word, enough to take no notice of my gaze.

I assumed his reason for listening in earnest was the same as it is in the game. The Magic Knight Corps saves Iori during a certain incident when he's very young, and from then on, he always looks up to them, which causes him to join the Academy. Whenever the conversation turns to the Magic Knight Corps, he gets deadly serious, too. And hey,

I understand; when the topic turned to eroge, I could get pretty earnest myself.

“Now then, before you all can enter this dungeon, we’re going to have you go into the Beginner’s Dungeon that’s managed by the Academy.”

The Beginner’s Dungeon is a small maze with a total of eleven layers. If it’s cleared normally, it ends at layer ten, but if certain conditions are met, it’ll unlock an extra floor—the eleventh layer.

“You’ll enter the labyrinth five days from now. I’ll go over the details at a later date. For now, be sure to prepare yourselves.”

Now that I thought about it, how were the extra floors and hidden dungeons handled in this world anyway? Did they open up to everyone once you grasped the conditions to unlock them, or were only a select few privy to this information? Or maybe no one actually knew about them at all?

I probably needed to investigate this a bit further.

As these thoughts swirled in my head, the bell rang to signal the end of class. After this, we were supposed to have a physical fitness test. In-game, it’s an extremely, extraordinarily, *tremendously* important scene.

“That’s an awfully stern look. Did something happen?” Iori asked, examining my expression.

“Oh, no, just had something on my mind.”

He gave a “let’s go” and pointed toward the door. I got up and walked beside him.

What was I going to do? The physical fitness test in the game depicts the heroines in their underwear from an omniscient third-person perspective and is an exceptionally important scene that awards the player CG. I’d love to get a photo if possible...or rather, to actually sear the sight itself into my brain. There was no way that was happening, though.

“Dang...can’t always get what I want, huh?”

“?”

I looked at Iori, the same question mark floating above him, and tried asking him the first thing that popped into my head.

“Say, Iori, what sorta girls do you like?”

“Huh? Where did that come from?”

“Well, I mean, we’re doing our physical fitness test next, right? That means we get to see the girls changin...*ahem*, we’ll get to see their athletic abilities. It’s a rare opportunity. Don’t you want to watch who you like the most?”

“Wait, you’re not worried about getting a good grade yourself first?” That answer was a little *too* diligent, don’t you think?

“Sure, sure, but c’mon, our class has a lot of cuties in it, right? How

about the girl who became our class representative? Ludie's pretty cute herself, too."

There were several characters in our class whom the player can befriend as main or sub-heroines. As a gamer myself, I wanted to know which he was currently interested in.

"The class representative and Princess Ludivine really are cute, aren't they?" Iori whispered, bringing both women into his line of sight.

"Right? You better tell me if there's anyone you're interested in, got it? Blood type, favorite foods, hobbies—I'll give you the whole scoop. Obviously, won't be for free, though."

"You want me...to pay you?"

"It all depends on the significance of the information, really. If it's something easy to look into, like favorite foods and stuff, then a free drink or meal voucher will seal the deal. I'll even throw in their blood types for free. But for anything that needs me to put my neck on the line, I'll need a bit more. Of course, if I discover any super out-there personal info, I'm not gonna be able to tell you about it."

Kousuke Takioto does the same thing in the game, too. He reveals your affection level with the heroines in exchange for money or magic stones, but the real question is how in the world he even gets ahold of that knowledge. I figured this was a game-only function, though.

"M-money, huh...?" Iori remarked in a slightly forlorn whisper. Then I realized that back at the start of the game, the protagonist has almost nothing to his name. That being said, you end up with a decent amount by the end of the first playthrough and the start of the second. Of course, during the third playthrough, a lot of it gets spent here and there along the way, so it's not until the fourth playthrough that all your cash starts rotting away in your inventory.

"Well, as a special friends discount, the first time's on me. Let's see... I'll tell you any info worth a single meal voucher."

We continued our idle conversation as we changed, before heading over toward the area they were using for the physical fitness test. I guess my results were a fair bit above average.



CONFIG

In the world of *Magical ★Explorer*, Kousuke Takioto is an underachiever.

Of course, his ineptitude with long-ranged magic isn't what makes him an underachiever. If, for example, you weren't great with magic but could develop unique magical tools, the Academy would commend you and hire you as a teacher. The institution properly endorsed anything worthy of praise.

So why exactly is Kousuke Takioto an underachiever, then? It's simply because he's a meathead (more muscle than brains) with poor academic abilities. On top of that, he's also a horndog (more libido than brains).

"I'm totally lost."

Somehow, for basic mathematics, language classes...or rather, for all the classes that usually popped up in *eroge* that didn't differ from their real-life counterparts in modern Japan, I was able to get by on my vague grade-school memories. But when it came to dealing with magical knowledge and history, I understood even less than a middle schooler. Actually, I knew even less than an elementary schooler in some instances.

"Is something the matter?" Ludie questioned from her seat in front of me. Given her noble status, this stiff and polite manner of speech shouldn't have felt unnatural, yet...since I'd been exposed to her friendlier speech style, I couldn't help but think it wasn't quite right.

"Nah, I'm just shocked at my own lack of academic ability."

In all honesty, the history of this world was crazy. Since 80 percent of the historical generals and heroes were all beautiful women, the whole thing had a real *eroge* vibe. No, it wasn't just a vibe—I really had wandered into an *eroge* world!

"Is that so?" Ludie replied, staring at me as she smiled deviously. I had no clue what she was thinking, but I got the feeling that whatever it was, it wasn't good.

"I guess Sis can help with my studies, so I bet I'll manage somehow."

Grateful for my good fortune, I planned to make the most out of

living together with a teacher. I trusted that she would readily agree to help instruct me.

A thought crossed my mind, and I turned my eyes to Iori and one of the main heroines, Katorina.

As far as I could tell from Iori's expression, he didn't seem to have any problems. I assumed his starting academic abilities were average, as they are in the game.

Katorina, however, was a whole different story. Stock-still, she gazed up at the formula on the board like a frog caught in the eyes of a snake.

"It seems you're not on my side after all, Iori."

"Huh? What makes you say that?"

"It seems Katorina is a true kindred spirit."

At my remark, she replied with languid confusion, as though half her soul had drained from her body.

"Wait, 'Katorina'...? Whatever, a nickname is fine with me, but what's that 'kindred spirit' comment about?"

She didn't seem to mind being called Katorina. I'd always referred to her that way in my head, so I was glad to get her permission.

"If you ever get an F, I'll be right there with you!" I asserted, nodding my head as I pounded her on the shoulder.

"Wha—? No, I'm not going to get any! But I admit I may be a tiny bit worse at school than everyone else..."

Katorina's voice grew quieter and quieter as she spoke. "A tiny bit" was really underselling it.

"But fear not! I have someone who can help!"

"All right, you...Kousuke Takioto, was it? You're not actually listening to me, are you?"

I lightly patted Ludie on the back.

"We can always ask Ludivine right here to teach us. Rest assured, she's got a much better head on her shoulders than you and me! We're safe and sound with her on our side."

"You really aren't listening to me, are you? And you're implying I'm an idiot, too, huh?"

"It sounds like my involvement is all but decided, then. Not that I mind teaching Katorina..."

Wait, so Ludie *did* mind teaching me? But it wasn't like I was actually planning on asking for her to teach me anyway. That was fine with me. My real objective was to have Ludie and Katorina become friends as fast as possible. When you put these two and a sub-heroine together, they trigger a crucial event for Iori. Though on my end, it would cause me nothing but grief for a variety of reasons.

Given how contrived the occasion I'd concocted was, I'd thought it would be difficult for Ludie and Katorina to suddenly start getting

along. Contrary to my expectations, however, the two girls immediately opened up to each other. Their nervous conversing was already morphing into a lighthearted back-and-forth. I was sure Katorina's frank and up-front personality had something to do with this. She was very easy to talk to. And to be honest, I also liked chatting with her. She was quick on the uptake and always ready to fire back with a comment of her own.

Although they were amicably conversing, Ludie was maintaining her usual prim and proper manner of speech. But I knew there'd come a day when she would let down the facade.

That just leaves..., I thought, staring at Iori.

Giving a cute little murmur, he began cleaning up the belongings on his desk and preparing to move to the next class. For the protagonist of this tale, he was quite the unreliable guy. Eroge are inundated with irresponsible protagonists, though, so this was par for the course, if anything.

Nevertheless, I needed him to become strong for me. To guide all the heroines to their happy endings.

I headed to Magic Training Arena I with Iori and company in tow. There, students amused themselves with idle conversation while clutching their weapons of choice. Amid all these people, Iori's gaze wandered to a certain section of the room. Standing before him was the class rep, one of the sub-heroines.

"Well, well, well. I get it now. Is she the one who's piqued your interest?"

"Wh-what? No, not at all!"

A few other people looked our way at Iori's reply. The class rep was one of them.

"Keep your voice down, stupid! Come over here a sec."

I beckoned him closer; he dubiously looked me in the eye before closing in as I'd requested.

"So you're into Class Rep Kaede Higurashi, huh? Well, well, quite the discerning eye. If I had to rank her, she'd get a B+ for sure."

"Class Rep...what is that, a nickname? And rank...? What do you mean?"

Class Rep's the class rep, right? But honestly, the only reason I called her that was because that's how the other eroge players referred to her.

I actually didn't really understand much about "ranking" the girls, either. That's just something the in-game version of Kousuke Takioto says. I guess he looks over all the girls and rates them accordingly. He probably throws his own arbitrary judgments and biases into the mix as well.

“Class Rep’s super dependable and really put-together, right? But I hear that her home life’s a little rough. She takes care of all the housework and looks after her sister, too.”

Kaede is the child of a single father. Since her mother dies right around the time her younger sister is becoming old enough to understand her surroundings, and her father is so busy with work, she decides she needs to support the family herself.

From then on, she takes charge of all the housekeeping and looks after her little sister. Thanks in part to her home situation, she ends up a very caring person, so she both helps her classmates study and checks over their work. If she has a single fault, though, it’s her airheaded tendencies. This often results in her making the strangest of blunders. In the game, for instance, she pulls off some real feats of failure, like wearing mismatched socks on a date with the player. Fortunately, Iori just interprets this as some sort of fashion statement.

Either way, he could ask me about all these details after he got closer to her.

“As her appearance suggests, she’s a big reader. She also likes kids and... Actually, any more than that’s gonna cost you a meal voucher.”

“R-really? But it’s only been about a week since school started... How did you dig up all that info?”

I made sure to smile at his questions. Then—

“Trade secrets. Anyway, if you want to find out more, either bring me that free meal or get to know her yourself.”

Obviously, I’d learned all of this stuff from *Magical ★Explorer*. Where else? Still, this was nothing special given that I’d been called an eroge database in my past life. But that’s neither here nor there. Now that I’d acquainted him with the class rep, I would get started on introducing some other heroines.

“While we’re at it, I’ll introduce you to a few other of our high-ranked classmates,” I proposed, then set my sights on Katorina. Iori turned in the same direction.

“She’s up next.”

At this, his mood visibly worsened.

Personally, I wanted to hook Iori up with Katorina. I’d always been able to clear her route in *Magical ★Explorer* unless I did something catastrophic. In fact, I’d never failed her story, times when I’d elected to go down a special route notwithstanding. Fans of the game even referred to her as a baby-mode heroine.

“Whoa, whoa, why the long face? All-around athlete, easy to talk to, and most important of all, very cute. She’s got people both inside and outside our class gunning for her, you know. C’mon, you feel the same way, right?” I remarked, pushing the topic onto someone nearby. The guy I called out looked a bit taken aback before he replied.

“Well, yeah, I think she’s pretty cute. But personally, I think I’m more interested in that elf next to me,” he said, scratching his orange-tinted head. He wore an auburn T-shirt without a dress shirt over it, along with a magic-stone pendant around his neck.

“Hmm, well... I guess I’m more interested in Katou, but I’m also interested in Ludivine, too, in a lot of different ways...,” the one other guy with us chimed in, pushing up his glasses. His ultramarine bangs were long enough to cover up his eyes, but it seemed like he could still see everything in front of him. Actually, they were so long that it looked like his *bangs* were wearing glasses, if anything. This was the kind of haircut you’d find on the eroge protagonists of yore.

“Oh yeah? Either way, though, I’d like them to be a tad older.”

“Uh, we’ve known each other for a while now, but I still don’t really get your taste in women. Well, I think, um...small and adorable girls are good, too. Ludivine’s not too bad, either. You agree, right, Hijiri?”

Iori nodded at Bangs’s statement.

“Sure, I guess. I think they’re both really cute. Princess Ludivine in particular.”

It appeared Iori harbored a negative impression of Katorina that stemmed from their first run-in with each other.

“Ha-ha. Seems like you’ve all set your sights on the unattainable prize. Aiming for the second daughter of the Tréfle emperor?”

At this, both Orange and Iori turned to me with surprise.

“...Is she really that far out of reach?”

“I mean, if an elf girl with the last name of Tréfle shows up, that’s pretty much a given, right? Ludie is an honest-to-goodness princess, after all. A girl of majesty and splendor who’s gifted with intelligence and good looks is an undeniable S+ -rank beauty. I mean, she’s got it all—wisdom, magic ability, wealth, and power.”

After I’d finished my spiel, Ludie let out a tiny sneeze.

“As for Katorina next to her, well, she loses out when it comes to wealth, wisdom, and authority, but her pretty face and magic skills stand out even compared with the whole of the Academy. If Ludie’s a hard-to-approach and carefully raised daughter of nobility, then Katorina’s got a bit of a classroom idol vibe, right? I’d say she gets an A+.”

Unfortunately, her cup size was also about an A+, too..... Curiously, I saw Katorina glaring over in our direction. What was that about, I wonder?

She and the other girl had sensed something and began closing in on us. Iori braced himself beside me, while Orange and Bangs were in a tizzy.

“Did you say something? I got a sort of nasty feeling just now.”

“Oh, we were just saying how there’s a lot of pretty girls in our class

is all,” I replied, trying to pass it off like it was no big deal.

“Yeah, you’re giving off some real creep energy. Skeevy, skeevy vibes.”

Did she really need to say it twice...? The thought that she was flat-chested had crossed my mind, that was all. Though I did recall her being pretty sensitive about it in the game.

“There’s that feeling again... And just where are you looking?”

Just then, I realized that there’s a similar back-and-forth in *Magical ★Explorer*. Shortly after this exchange, Kousuke Takioto lets a real rude comment slip. He offends her so much that she smashes him to a pulp in a mock battle.

Perfectly in line with my recollection of the in-game event, Katorina approached me with a smile on her face. Then she rested her hand on my shoulder. As she did, it radiated with pain.

“Well, if you’ve got something to say, spit it out.”

“Youch! That hurts!”

Kousuke Takioto calls her flat-chested here in-game, but I wasn’t going to do anything stupid like that. That would have been rude.

“Well, then.”

She sighed, letting go of my shoulder. Then she beamed at me.

“Sorry about that. I guess I was jumping at shadows a bit.”

I smiled as I fixed my shirt collar.

“Ah, don’t worry about it. I don’t mind.”

That was no sweat. Picking the best response to avoid an unnecessary event was a simple task for an eroge gentleman such as myself. That held true whether it was my first time seeing the event or not.

As I chuckled inwardly, Katorina suddenly started to rotate her shoulders.

“Well, at any rate...having big breasts is really murder on your back.”

I looked down at her cutting-board chest on instinct.

“Pfft!”

I quickly came to my senses, but by then, it was too late. The anger—or more accurately, the murderous rage—radiating from her washed over my whole body.

“.....Th-that’s rough, huh?”

“Oh, I know *exactly* what you’re thinking. Well...I hope you’re ready for what’s next.”

Her joke had clearly been unfair. Then, right as I was trying to decide between making a run for it or using Iori as a shield—

“Okay, kids, time for class!”

—our teacher told us to take our seats. My savior!

The next thing I knew, I felt another hand on my shoulder. Slender

fingers with well-manicured nails. The hand clearly belonged to Katorina. This time around, there was no force in her grip. What it lacked in strength, however, it made up for in *mana* instead.

I felt huge amounts of cold sweat running off me.

“Takioto. I’m reserving a mock battle with you...understand?”

To be honest, I wish I didn’t.

Ludie watched on beside Katorina but then walked off together with her to where everyone was gathering.

Orange heaved a small sigh.

“Hey, Takioto, you gonna be all right? Just seeing her mana and the way she moves her body tells me she’s pretty damned swole.”

Iori seemed to agree, gazing at me with a face filled with pity and sorrow.

“Y-you can do it!”

Katorina, one of the game’s heavenly main heroines, is a thief-style melee fighter who mainly engages in close-quarters combat. As a main heroine, she receives preferential treatment; in addition to high attack, defense, and evasion, she’s also blessed with an excellent selection of magic and skills to learn. She excels in many of the dungeons and proves a powerful ally to the protagonist from the very first boss to the last, not to mention all the way to the hidden boss at the end of the expansion disc as well.

Nevertheless, that didn’t necessarily mean her stats were high from the get-go.

“Are you ready, then?”

Nodding, I squared up against the girl, who’d finished preparations of her own. She gripped a dagger, her weapon of choice, in one of her hands.

The reason she isn’t strong from the get-go is because she’s one of the first characters you befriend in the game. The reason is a bit obvious. If a strong character joined your party right from the start, would that make the game any fun? No, definitely not.

If Katorina was as strong now as she is at the beginning of the game, I didn’t have the slightest fear of losing.

“Man, my stomach’s killing me all of a sudden.”

However, even if Katorina was indeed as strong as I expected, would it be okay for me to beat her right now?

In *Magical ★Explorer*, this mock battle serves as the combat tutorial.

The player faces off against no-name classmates, learns how to control their party members, and fights with them on the combat screen. After claiming victory over your classmates, you clash with

Katorina, fresh off her victory against Kousuke Takioto.

Indeed—Katorina claims victory over him.

“Oh? Then I’ll slice your stomach open and check to see what the problem is for you.”

After that, Katorina loses her fight with Iori and declares him her rival, and they each spur each other on as they grow stronger.

“The phrase *pulling punches* really is wonderful, isn’t it? I especially love it when people do that against me.”

I wanted to become the strongest in the world. However, this was only to ensure I guided each heroine to her happy ending. I was totally fine with them honing their abilities on their own, without any assistance on my part, so long as they reached their happy endings.

Magical ★Explorer has an unusually large number of events the player can trigger. This means they have to be discerning about their choices. From a scheduling perspective, it was also extremely difficult to be present for each and every one of the different heroines’ events. If they could achieve satisfaction through their own efforts, or if Iori or the other heroines could do something to help out, I’d like to be able to entrust them with getting all the events.

In all honesty, though, this was just an excuse. I wanted Katorina to grow stronger precisely because I knew just how powerful she could become.

“Pull punches, huh? Why don’t I think about it...? Anyway, how long are you going to stand there? Hurry up and get your weapon out.”

What I loved about Katorina was neither her petite frame, nor her modest chest, nor her abrasive personality, which concealed her true kindheartedness. I did like those parts of her, sure, but there was something about her that trumped all her other qualities.

The most endearing part of her is that she vies for the distinction of being the game’s most competitive heroine. A lot of the girls in *Magical ★Explorer* are sore losers to begin with, but Katorina looks especially frustrated upon defeat. She always follows up a loss by working hard to get stronger on her own.

“Nah, I’m fine like this.”

This would probably be the only time I could go up against her without breaking a sweat. Main heroines were little balls of potential. I didn’t plan on making it easy for her to catch up to me, but it was always a possibility.

That was why I was going to totally beat her down here and torment her with the frustration. I was going to incite that competitive spirit of hers. Losing to a guy like me now would be a huge source of motivation going forward. Besides, I loved powerful heroines.

I especially wanted the characters who sought might on their own

accord to grow strong. And heck, I also wanted the male characters, Iori included, to grow powerful as well.

But don't get it twisted—I was still going to eclipse them and become the mightiest of all.

Gradually, I began to increase the amount of mana I sent through my stole. When it began to float in the air as though it was a living creature all its own, both of Katorina's eyes opened wide in surprise as she stared at it.

“Ready when you are.”

“.....Fine. Here I come.”

Right as she finished speaking, it happened. Katorina kicked off from the ground, and, flying in a straight line toward me with her dagger held upside down, she slashed toward my flank.

It was a fairly impressive amount of speed, I suppose. She was nowhere close to Yukine's velocity and was also slower than Claris. I immediately opened up my Third Hand to defend myself from the attack.

There was a loud *clang* of metal clashing with metal.

It wasn't the sound a knife meeting cloth would normally make. And yet that was the noise that reverberated as the fabric composing my stole repelled her weapon.

Katorina seemed to grasp the power of my accessory. Gnashing her teeth, she shot me a piercing glare.

“...‘Pull punches’? You think you need that?”

The aura around her shifted.

By the looks of the mana radiating off of her growing more intense, she appeared to be recasting her enhancement magic.

That wasn't the only change. The knife she held was now enveloped in a faint yellow glow. She must have applied some sort of magic to it after determining that her normal weapon wouldn't be enough. Thinking back to the spells available to her from the start of the game, I assumed it was some earth element enchantment to strengthen the dagger's edge.

As I watched her carefully, I heard an annoyed click of her tongue escape her mouth.

“.....*Hah*, this sucks. Got nothing but bad feelings about this. Stupid sly fox.”

“Fly? Foxes don't fly.”

Though I'd heard her correctly, I deliberately replied as though I'd misheard her.

“Ugh. You *absolutely* got that the first time, didn't you? *Argh*, the fact that a guy like you has so much skill really pisses me off.”

Slowly, she moved her body sideways.

“Hey, c'mon, what do you mean ‘like me’? I may not look it, but I'm

still training hard, you know.”

“Don’t worry; our last clash made that *very* clear.”

She moved as though she were drawing a circle around me. Slowly and surely, almost like a predator stalking its prey, she carefully observed my movements as she cast a hard stare my way.

Katorina had just finished her first circle when it happened—there was a sound nearby, like an object being slammed against something, and for a second, my eyes turned toward the noise. It seemed to have come from Ludie’s magic knocking her opponent to the floor.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve to look away at other girls when you’ve got a wonderful lady in front of you.”

When I turned my gaze back to the source of the voice, Katorina was already right in front of me. The wide-eyed girl’s knife, the blade shrouded in yellow light, was homing in on me.

It was true that I had taken my eyes off her.

In spite of that, I’d kept my guard up. Since I’d been sparring with Claris and Yukine practically every day, I was able to meet her velocity. On top of that, I’d prepared at all times to protect myself from attacks.

“You’re brandishing something pretty dangerous for such a lovely lady. Though I admit that the ‘lovely’ part is accurate no matter what.”

She seemed to put more force into her attack. When my Fourth Hand blocked the strike, I grabbed her arm. Then, picking up her body with my Third Hand, I casually flung her aside.

Katorina didn’t end up slamming into the ground, though. It was better if I didn’t throw her *too* hard. She landed cleanly on the floor and immediately readied her blade before rushing toward me.

After repeatedly nullifying her dagger slashes over and over again, I sent a kick into her exhausted side, which sent her reeling backward and opened up some space. Then—

“This seriously sucks. How humiliating.”

She hissed before sheathing her weapon.

Katorina should have been largely undamaged. She should have been able to keep going. And yet she understood.

She knew she wasn’t going to beat me.

Taking quick and long strides over toward me, she glared hard at me.

“You bested me today, but you better remember this!”

I felt a light hit on my stomach.

“Because next time, I’m going to win.”

That was Katorina’s declaration of war.

“Hmm, equipping something else besides your stole, huh?” Yukine Mizumori pondered as she pushed back her sweat-soaked hair and grabbed a washrag.

She was clad in her martial arts training wear, and she’d done up her hair in a ponytail that extended down to the shoulder, exposing the smooth nape of her neck. The youthfully light and smooth skin on display was so alluring that I was unable to peel my eyes away, as though it were radiating some sort of bewitching magic. Even when I tried to look away, I couldn’t. I wanted to touch it.

“That’s a very difficult proposition...”

“A very difficult one indeed.”

Why didn’t Yukine have a fan club when she was so pretty? I’d asked a wide range of people at the Academy, but I couldn’t confirm whether she had one or not. It was baffling.

The only fan clubs I had been able to confirm were the same three that appeared in the game.

The president’s fan club of bodyguards, MMM, and the Acting Saint’s fan club of holy knights, SSS. Finally, there was Ludie’s recently inaugurated fan club of imperial cavaliers, LLL.

Better yet, I could make a new fan club for Yukine myself. If I needed to follow precedent, then how about YYY? I’ve always wanted to be a founding member.

“Depending on the weapon, you could augment your current strengths or cover some of your weaknesses, too.”

“...Actually, I was also thinking of holding a shield instead of a weapon.”

My wild fantasies had delayed my reply to Yukine.

“I see. That way you can defend yourself with the shield and free up your Third and Fourth Hands to attack. In a pinch, you could even guard with your Third and Fourth Hands to form a real iron defense.”

In the game, Kousuke isn’t able to equip bows or other long-ranged weapons, so his most popular loadout was as a tank that utilized four shields at once. However, this time, I was outside the game. There were no equipment restrictions. Wielding a bow to account for my biggest weakness would be a stroke of genius.

“My suggestion would be to actually try out some weapons and choose the one that’s easiest to use,” Yukine said.

“Makes sense...”

“In my case, I’ve studied the katana, the naginata, and some archery as well, but earlier in my childhood, I was forced to try many other things besides those. Naginata suited me the best out of all of them and was also what I was best with. Regardless of how strongly you’re motivated to use certain weapons, I think it’s crucial to keep which you’re suited for in mind.”

“In that case...it would be best to try out a variety of different weapons, then.”

Yukine nodded at my reply.

“Yeah. At least, that’s what I think. Once you’re done experimenting, though, you should settle on your weapon of choice as fast as possible. It would be a waste to only achieve a passing familiarity with everything instead.”

So basically, specialization was better than being a jack-of-all-trades, master of none. Honestly, she was probably right on the money there.

“Well, then... I should pick up anything and give it a shot to start out, right? In that case, though, I don’t really know which to choose first.”

Swords, the orthodox pick? Katanas, the Japanese way? Spears, to give me some reach? Maces, axes, bows...

“I could give you pointers on katanas and naginatas. You can stop by the dojo to learn more. Seriously, they’re both wonderful weapons... Exceptionally sharp compared with their peers... Easy to enchant, too. I highly recommend them. The only thing is that you would have to learn how to dodge and block with gauntlets, since you can’t hold a shield and a katana at the same time. But with your knowledge of Mind’s Eye and your Third and Fourth Hands covering your weak spots, I think you’d be able to perfectly show off the blade’s strengths... How’s that sound?!”

Grabbing my hand and putting me on the spot like this... Yukine’s fervor for the katana was something else. I’d already thought it would be best to start with one of the weapons Yukine or Claris specialized in anyway, however, so that was fine by me.

“Hmm... I guess I’ll start by trying one out, then.”

“Heh-heh, I figured that someday this day would arrive, so I’ve come prepared!” Yukine announced before suddenly producing a wooden practice sword out of thin air. No, really, where exactly did that thing come from?

Whatever the case, her smiling face sure was an adorable sight to behold. The fact that I had to turn down her offer for the moment was incredibly disappointing.

“Um, I’m unbelievably honored you prepared this for me, but...I have to go to class after this...”

Yukine nodded knowingly.

“Good point. Then, starting after school—is what I’d like to say, but I have Morals Committee work... Tomorrow morning, then?”



I was totally fine with that, of course.

“Thank you, Yukine.”

At my reply, she brought her hands together, as though recalling something.

“That reminds me... We talked about it a while ago, but it sounds like it’s happening.”

“Um, what’s happening again?”

Was she talking about the creation of the YYY club? If that were the case, she was getting a bit ahead of herself. I hadn’t given anyone my permission to make the Yukine Mizumori fan club yet. That would be an unforgivable act of foolishness. If they granted me the position of member number zero or number one, however, then I could allow it. Obviously, that wasn’t what she was referring to, though.

“It’s about your dungeon course; it looks like we’ll be allowed to be in the same party. With Ludie, too, of course.”

I gave a surprised nod.

“Did Marino arrange things for us?”

“I only mentioned it to her in passing, but I got the approval almost right after that. She told me she ‘shuffled us together’ like it was nothing.”

Bravo, Marino. This meant I could go into the labyrinth with Yukine in tow. Depending on the other members I entered with, getting to the tenth layer on our first attempt wasn’t out of the question.

“Takioto...you’re really excited, huh?”

“Together with you, Yukine? How could I not be?!”

She scratched her cheeks and grinned at my reply.

“Listen, what you’re normally supposed to say is... Nah, forget it. About time to head for school,” she remarked before turning on her heel. When I considered the time to get back to the house and shower, I realized she was right to leave now. I’d be cutting it pretty close.

When Ludie and I arrived at class together, we were met with curious stares. I figured it was probably because I had her next to me. If I were in their shoes, I would probably do the same.

I wondered if she was used to crowds of gawking bystanders. Given her highborn status as an imperial princess, though, I suppose it would be stranger if she wasn’t.

“Morning.”

Katorina gutlessly stepped away from the crowd of curious onlookers to greet us.

She conversed with Ludie normally, seeming to pay no heed to her peers’ stares.

Much like Katorina, Iori didn’t worry over how the others were gazing at us, either. He joined us and enlivened our conversation, but

I could tell this topic was going to drag on awhile, so—

“Hang on a sec; we have to move classes after first period today, right? We gotta go,” I cut in, urging the other three on.

As the four of us went to next period, Ludie and Katorina abruptly stopped in their tracks.

“Hmm? What’s the deal? We can’t get through this.”

“This is quite the crowd... I wonder why.”

You never saw this many people hanging around in the halls. Typically, everyone just moved to their destinations immediately via spatial magic.

Mixing in with the mob, I pushed my way through to look at the person everyone was grouped around. Then all became clear. This was the beginning of an event.

I backed up slightly through the path I’d cleared and beckoned Ludie and the others over. When I did, some of the students got into a huff, but they withdrew their tempers as soon as they laid eyes on the princess. Not only that, but they took the lead in securing a spot for her. Probably LLL members, I figured.

When I guided my friends to somewhere they could get a good look, they nodded at me to look ahead of me.

Standing before us was Student Council President Monica Mercedes von Mobius, one of *Magical ★Explorer’s* Big Three, together with heroine Stefania Scaglione, who was both captain of the Morals Committee and Acting Saint.

“The student council president and the saint! Two of the Three Committee heads are right in front of us.”

“Man, they’re so pretty.”

The awestruck bystanders conversed among themselves. When I asked the guy next to me what happened, he filled me in:

“A fight broke out; it was serious enough that spells started flying. The student council president and the saint happened to be walking by and resolved the situation.”

That sealed the deal. This was the event where the protagonist first encounters the Three Committees, which play a significant role in the main story, along with two of the main heroines. Actually, Iori and the others didn’t know anything about the Three Committees at this point, so I was probably going to have to fill them in.

Still, this event was missing someone. Minister Benito from the Ceremonial Committee, one of the more popular male characters, was nowhere to be found. Maybe all three didn’t show up here? No, it definitely felt like they were supposed to.

As I mulled this over, the man himself arrived, striding toward the other two. A girl dressed in a kimono was walking alongside him. As they continued toward where the other two committee leaders stood,

a path formed out of the tightly packed hallways, as though he were Moses parting the Red Sea. Despite the fact that Minister Benito served as the president of the committee (ceremonial minister), the conspicuousness of the girl's kimono amid the crowd of uniforms made her, the vice president of the organization (ceremonial vice-minister), stand out more. Considering her uniform was potentially the most modified out of all the game's cast, though, that didn't surprise me. Really, there was scarcely a trace of her school outfit left.

"Well, what do we have here? The student council president and the captain of the Morals Committee in the same room at once?"

With his arrival on the scene, the mood dramatically shifted. The first-year students were all puzzled, but the second- and third-years all shot angry glares at him.

The boy in front of me clicked his tongue, and the boy next to him grew irritated at the arrival of "Bastardo." Beside them, a girl nearby cast an ice-cold stare at the girl accompanying the ceremonial minister.

"Why, if it isn't Benito."

"Hello, Benito."

He looked around.

"What happened here? You've drawn quite the crowd."

I got the feeling Benito's gaze stopped for a second on our spot, but he was probably just looking at Ludie.

"Well, a small dispute dissolved into a full-blown magic brawl..."

"Stef and I happened to be nearby, and we resolved the situation," Student Council President Monica stated, shrugging her shoulders.

"Hence the big commotion...", Benito replied, surveying the crowd once again. Then he chuckled before continuing:

"A wonderful waste of your time, really. How unfortunate. I can't help but wonder why the Academy doesn't just expel the problem children and underachievers. Truly an eyesore, the lot of them. How I wish they'd just slink back to the countryside and never make their presence known again. It would be nice of them to stop wasting the precious time of elites like ourselves. I wonder how many of these eyesores are gaping in this crowd here."

At his words, the student council president's attitude noticeably shifted.

"What was that, Benito? Slips of the tongue can happen, so surely you plan on retracting that statement, correct?"

"She's right. You went a bit too far, wouldn't you agree?"

"Am I wrong, though? Don't you both feel the same way?! All these talentless problem students should be sent packing. No academic skills, no magic skills, and no familial prestige. What else is there to be done?"

“Minister Benito here is quite right indeed. Why shan’t we cast these commoner apes to the winds?”

The air around us felt as though the temperature had dropped a few degrees.

“Now, now, Benito, Shion. Apologize.”

Watching the saint as she continued to give respectable and honest replies, I heaved an inward sigh. Of all the major characters gathered here at the moment, she was certainly the strangest. And although it would give me an extraordinary amount of trouble to pull off, she was also one of the heroines I intended to save.

Benito showed no signs of guilt at her admonishment. In fact, his guffaws only intensified.

“Ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha, ha... All I did was voice the truth,” Benito replied, and one of the nearby enraged male students looked up and stepped toward him. Then the angry boy caught Benito’s attention by shouting “Hey, Bastardo,” and the two started arguing.

The other male onlookers in the circle began murmuring among themselves.

“Tch. It pisses me off, but Nito’s got the skills to back up his talk.”

“Apparently, the Ceremonial Committee members have already cleared down to layer fifty. Looks like they’ll reach the sixtieth layer by their third year.”

“Whoa, for real? Even though they’re always goofing around?!”

“Makes it feel pointless to try so hard, right? Guess it’s talent after all.”

I was eavesdropping on their conversation when I suddenly felt a tap on my shoulder.

It was from Ludie.

“So who are these people, if I may ask? I’m familiar with the student council president, but as for the other two... Also, if you know anything about these ‘Three Committees,’ I would like to hear it.”

“What, you don’t know? Does the same go for you two?” I asked my friends. I figured they probably weren’t aware, since this is the moment those details are explained in the game.

Iori was clueless, just as I’d anticipated. I lightly cleared my throat before I launched into an explanation.

“Here at the Academy, there are a couple organizations that hold a lot of power and authority, which are collectively known as the Three Committees,” I said, turning my eyes toward Monica.

“The first is the student council, led by Monica Mercedes von Mobius. You saw her at the entrance ceremony, right?”

Iori and I hadn’t, actually. Oh well, whatever.

Next, I shifted my focus over to Stefania Scaglione, wearing a white

robe draped over her uniform.

“The second is the Morals Committee, led by Stefania Scaglione, or rather, the saint. By ‘saint,’ I mean she’s the saint of our current era. I’m sure I don’t need to explain that.”

The others’ gazes followed along my own—to the snobby boy and beautiful kimono-clad girl.

“The third is the Ceremonial Committee, led by Benito. The Japanese belle there is one of the committee’s leaders, too. Benito’s apparently a noble from Leggenze.”

“Nobility, huh? I don’t know... I have no idea what a ‘Ceremonial Committee’ even does, but they definitely give off bad vibes, that’s for sure,” Katorina remarked. I nodded for now.

“Well, putting aside whatever impressions they give off, these Three Committees make most of the important decisions at the Academy and also keep it running. You need to be a first-rate magic-user to ever hope to join any of them, however. Essentially, they’re the elite of the school. If you’re aiming to be a magic knight or court mage, or take up any position of power, really, it might behoove you to join one of them. From what I hear, so long as your grades aren’t absolutely terrible, you’ll be well-regarded both for governmental positions and in the private sector if you do.”

“But it’s not easy, right?”

“No, of course not. On top of needing top-tier magic skills, you’ll have to fulfill several conditions depending on which committee you join. There’s also a member limit to contend with. Well, there actually isn’t a limit if you enter one of the subcommittees. Thing is, the Ceremonial Committee doesn’t have any subdivisions. Only the student council and Morals Committee have those.”

In the game, you have to work your way up the subcommittees to join both the student council and the Morals Committee. The Ceremonial Committee is a bit unique. Unless you’re speedrunning, you can’t join until the second playthrough. Also, it turns out that it does have subcommittees, but they’re hidden to the general student body.

Right as I finished my explanation, the argument between Benito and the boy reached its climax.

“Okay, Bastardo...say that one more time. I dare you.”

Despite the spiky-haired boy glowering at him as though he’d murdered his parents, Benito merely let out a small, belittling sigh as the edge of his lips curled upward.

“I’ll say it as many times as you want. You haven’t cleared any of the dungeon yet, your grades are poor, and your behavior is atrocious. And above all else, you’re an eyesore. You should just give up and skitter off back to the sticks. Honestly, you’d really be doing yourself a

favor. Ha-ha, see, aren't I so thoughtful?!"

His tirade caused the kimono-clad beauty next to him to gently admonish him.

"Now, Minister Benito, whether true or not, would it not be best to sugarcoat it a bit more?"

"No, I really think making it loud and clear is in his best interests."

The student council president heaved an exaggerated sigh as she watched the two Ceremonial Committee heads bicker.

"I see the Ceremonial Committee is operating the same as ever. You people really do seem to be missing a fundamental part of your humanity."

The young lady next to Benito murmured in shock before facing the student council president with a bright smile. However, there was no trace of amusement in her eyes.

"Oh, Miss Student Council President. May I assume you have no qualms with a vote of no confidence?"

"If you can, go right ahead. But if my memory serves me correctly, that power only rests with the ceremonial minister, not the *vice*-minister, yes?"

"Even if I lack the authority to do so, I can give you a proper thrashing out here in public. Then, with your reputation in shreds, I shall enjoy watching you fall down the student council ladder."

"Oh...do you think you can beat me, Shion? Now I wonder which of us will be the one plummeting from grace in defeat... But wait, you've already lost all your prestige, so I suppose you have no farther to sink."

The two women were flashing each other empty smiles. If this were a scene in an action manga, there would be dark and menacing sound effects looming over them both, and each would probably have a dragon or demon of some kind behind her.

"Class is going to start soon, so why don't you both leave it at that?"

I was beginning to wonder just how long the two would keep glaring at each other when Saint Stef declared it over.

"Hmph!"

They each turned away from the other, and Shion entered a spatial magic circle. Seeing this, Benito followed after her before shouting, "Ha-ha-ha, let us meet again, Stefania!" The spiky-haired boy ignored the magic circle and went off toward an exit.

Saint Stefania watched them depart, then said...

"Okay, everyone, it's time for class. All of you should head off to your classrooms."

...to break up the crowd. With that, she entered the circle herself and teleported away.

Finally, the student council president started toward the same

emblem as the saint, only to suddenly look over in our direction. She flashed me a sly grin before entering.

“Oh, so those are the girls behind the Big Three fan clubs...”

“Saint Stefania really is wonderful. I’m glad I joined SSS.”

“I much prefer Student Council President Monica, myself. Stefania comes off a bit cold and impenetrable.”

“You know, I think I like the newest big fan club, LLL, myself.”

The people around us each lauded their favorite girl.

Seeing how everyone was acting left Iori with questions.

“Hey, Takioto. Do you know anything about these three clubs?”

I responded with exaggerated surprise—“Whoa, you don’t even know about that, either?”—and began my explanation.

“I mean, they’re fan organizations for popular students at the Academy. Two of those students were just standing right over there.”

I pointed my chin to show him. He murmured in acknowledgment.

“You mean President Monica and Lady Stefania?”

“Yup. Monica’s bodyguard fan club is MMM. The Acting Saint’s holy knight fan club is SSS.”

“Hold up, what’s MMM supposed to be? Like, her initials? But in that case, the SSS doesn’t make any sense...,” Katorina chimed in with a reasonable question of her own. At first, I’d also thought Monica’s fan club was based on the initials from her full name of Monica Mercedes von Mobius. Unfortunately, it really had nothing to do with that.

“C’mon, obviously, it stands for Monica, Majorly Monica. As an aside, SSS is Stefania, Super Stefania.”

“I don’t think there’s anything I’ve ever understood less,” Ludie commented, looking dismayed and confused. To be fair, I’d also thought this was all absolute gibberish when I’d first had it explained to me, too.

“According to MMM, Monica is beautiful and gallant, like a goddess of war. That’s pretty easy to comprehend. From there, they asked themselves, *What if the goddess of war was actually Monica?* and from that conjecture, they concluded that she was a deity. So that goddess of war? They started saying, *Oh, they must mean Monica instead.*”

“I don’t get it at all...”

“Think of it like this. The way the people in MMM describe it, the actual name Monica also means ‘goddess of war,’ so Monica, Majorly Monica means ‘Monica, Majorly Goddess of War.’”

To put it more simply, it was like they replaced all instances of the noun *Monica* with *goddess of war*, and vice versa. Probably.

“I’m getting a headache...”

Katorina could just look up the terms online. Actually, depending on the browser, I was pretty sure you could auto-replace the words to

match...

“Same thing with SSS. According to them, Stefania means ‘archangel.’ In other words—”

“Stefania, Super Archangel, right?”

“Right on the money, Iori.”

He replied with a convinced “huh.” Was this really something you needed convincing about?

“Actually, you said there were three big fan clubs, didn’t you? Then what’s the other one?”

I answered Katorina’s inquiry with a look.

“Hmm? Is something the matter?”

Ludie, the person I’d glanced at, didn’t seem to get what I was implying. Katorina and Iori, however, both appeared to have figured it out.

“Ah, I get it. Makes sense, honestly. She’s super pretty, smart, and skilled with magic.”

“You heard her, Ludie. Good luck,” I encouraged her, dragging the conversation back.

“?”

Though it seemed she still didn’t comprehend what we were talking about, our peers’ reactions made it clear whom I was referencing. The students around us were looking our way and whispering in hushed tones to one another.

“I think I’m going with LLL after all.”

“Yeah, she’s got beauty and nobility, and most importantly, she’s an elven princess. Aw, yeah, she’s the best.”

The commotion gradually began to spread. With it, Ludie appeared to finally begin to piece things together, so I decided to explain it all to her.

“The last of the major three fan clubs has been gaining new members at a breakneck pace, the dedicated imperial cavaliers to their new elven star, Ludivine Marie-Ange de la Tréfle, known as LLL or Lovely, Lovely Ludivine. That’s right—it’s your fan club,” I revealed, giving her a pat on the shoulder, which caused an adorable gasp of confusion to escape her lips.

The dumbfounded stupor on her face was something I don’t think I would ever forget.



CONFIG

I had expected as much, but the afternoon classes were almost entirely meaningless to me.

From reading the syllabi, most of the lectures were all concerned with practical-use spells, mainly centering on long-ranged magic. A portion of the lectures were also aimed at research, but they didn't seem like they'd be useful for dungeon combat, so I wasn't motivated to attend. Besides, I seemed to have the lowest degree of fundamental magic knowledge in the whole Academy.

Still, there was always the off chance that I would miraculously become capable of using long-ranged magic. Either that, or I could discover a useful application of magic myself! With that in mind, I tried attending my wife's (for I had many different wives in this game alone) lecture, but almost nothing came from it.

Nevertheless, my true motive—her large, jiggling lumps of meat and her saccharine voice—served as a feast for my eyes and ears. I was extremely satisfied. If you asked me which was more important, long-ranged magic or this lovely older woman, there could be only one answer.

From my estimates, the eyes of half the boys in the class were focused not on the written words on the board but on her two mounds of flesh.

“Okay, it's time to actually try applying what you've learned! If you think you've gotten the hang of it, let me know, and I'll test you on it.”

Listening to her sweet voice, like honey drizzling over chocolate, made me feel as though I had wandered into a gingerbread house. This was far beyond happiness—I felt downright euphoric.

I wondered if she could stay at my side and whisper words of love into my ear for an hour straight. On second thought, they didn't even need to be affectionate. I'd settle with her reading a picture book to me just fine. Her voice was so gorgeous that not only was I smitten with drowsiness, but also my pounding heart simply...

“Oh? You're...Takioto, right?”

“Whoa!”

“.....Looks like I was correct.”

I hadn't realized she'd come over to my spot. Ms. Ruija dubiously cast her eyes on me. Considering how we first met, she might have held some mixed feelings toward me.

I had come to replenish my energy, that was all.

“Well, actually...I'm innately incapable of using long-ranged magic very well.”

At my reply, she cocked her cute face with a mole under her eye to the side, as though a question mark had appeared over her head.

“Let's see...”

She produced her Tsukuyomi Traveler device and started checking over something. When I tried to sneak a peek, she snapped “No, bad!” like she was reprimanding a small child. ¡Que bonita! She was so adorable that my brain had started thinking in Spanish for a second. I wanted to hear it one more time—I could try peeking again, right?

“...Ahhh, I see; it does seem that way.”

In short, she'd been looking up my personal information.

“Yeah, that's how it is. I thought I might be able to activate it if I found some sort of trigger, but...,” I said, giving my cover story. Deep down, a good 90 percent of my reason for coming was to see Ms. Ruija. But I couldn't let that slip.

I couldn't help but feel rejuvenated as she reacted with an overblown “My goodness!” If Yukine Mizumori put me in a sort of fired-up mood where I was ready to take on the world, then this lady made me feel like I was reinvigorated after a tough day, raring to get back in the fight.

“Well, well, well. I see, then! All right! I'll help you however I can. Please give me the whole story.”

While explaining my situation to her, I actually tried firing off an incantation. Glancing casually around the room, I found the other students in the course staring at us. They were whispering among themselves in hushed tones, too.

I figured they were jealous that I was monopolizing Ms. Ruija. They weren't all like me, though, so that wasn't it. In which case, they were probably wondering something like, *If he can't use long-ranged spells, then why did he attend this practical magic lecture in the first place?* Whatever the case may have been, it wasn't anything worth fretting about. I didn't plan on attending any more of her talks anyway.

“This...looks like you'll have a bumpy road ahead of you...”

“I tried looking up if there were any previous examples of people struggling with this, but I discovered that the Founding Saint had a similar condition and couldn't come up with a solution, either.”

The Founding Saint had only been capable of using defensive magic, which included healing, support, and counter spells, such as barrier

magic, enhancement magic, and healing magic. In exchange, however, her healing magic was tremendous; she'd been capable of casting spells that could fully recover someone from downed status numerous times in a row. Also, since her abilities were unbelievably absurd in a variety of ways, the illustrious eroge gamers came up with a ton of eccentric nicknames for her. If I remembered correctly, the most popular of these was St. Doomsday.

"While I'd love to ask her directly...she passed away a long time ago."

The Founding Saint was a hero from a thousand years ago. Normally, you would think she would have died a long time ago. But it turns out she was actually still alive... In fact, if you met the right conditions in the game, she would join your party.

I was working to guide all the heroines, the Founding Saint included, toward their happy endings. I was lacking the skills now, but I was bound to meet her eventually.

"Ooooookay! I'll think up some ways to handle this! We'll work on this together!"

Then with a "whoo-hoo!" Ms. Ruija balled up her fist and thrust it up into the sky. By herself.

"....."

She puffed out her cheeks a little and stared at me. What, I was supposed to do that, too?

"*Ahem!* Let's try again. We'll work hard together!"

"Wh-whoo-hoo..."

Two days quickly passed after declaring I would "work hard" with Ms. Ruija. Unfortunately, I had no intention of going to see her at all from now on.

While it was true that I could enjoy being healed by her full-body aromatherapeutic existence should my spirit get broken and I lose hope, at the present moment, my spirit showed no signs of breaking. Taking up her offer would be breaking through event flags left and right, if anything. Moreover, instead of taking her elective, it would be more valuable to quickly head home and have Claris coach me instead.

"You're so strong, Claris. I don't know why you were driven into such a corner back then..."

"I—I simply let down my guard that time is all..."

Her ears sagged a bit as a sullen look came over her.

In complete contrast to her expression, Claris's attacks only grew fiercer. But my mana-imbued stole repelled them all. Or at least, it could have, but—

"*Hngh!*"

Thanks to the enhancement magic coursing through her muscles, every one of her strikes was incredibly hefty. Since I was unable to properly parry her blows, my feet were nearly driven into the earth as I stood my ground.

True, my stole shield's defensive abilities had proven themselves. But I still couldn't dampen the force of the attacks coming at me. To be fair, I was getting better at parrying attacks due to my daily training and my mastery of the Mind's Eye skill. And yet even that wasn't enough.

Claris continued her assault as she activated an incantation.

A gale kicked up from the ground around us, creating a swirling cloud of dust. In an instant, the visibility dropped to zero.

Nothing proved more troublesome than moments like these when she would mix spells in with her strikes. I could generally defend against her normal blows just fine, but Claris kept employing tricky incantations to toy with me. This time, however, she appeared to have made the wrong move. Thanks to Mind's Eye, the cloud of dust was meaningless. I could make out her movements clear as day.

Switching onto the offensive, I dashed forward to meet her. Claris immediately noticed me closing in on her and fell back. Then she began chanting a spell.

I closed the distance and lashed out with my Third Hand before she could fire off her incantation...

But the moment I extended my stole, my vision suddenly slanted sideways. It appeared a hole had opened up on the ground where my foot was.

"Just when did you set this up...?!"

I was standing where Claris had been just moments prior. She'd pretended like she was going to confound me with some magical sleight of hand in order to lay a trap. Fortunately, my leg didn't appear to be injured. I had simply lost my balance from planting my feet at a weird angle. Nevertheless, this moment would be the end of me.

I regained my stance and opened up my stole before me. Just then, I saw some large stones hurtling straight at me.

The sound of metal deflecting rock reverberated with an impressive *clang*.

"Those were way too big!"

Stones was underselling it—they were practically boulders. Boulders the size of a person's face. A direct hit would probably have cut my life short. Claris approached me as I fell on my ass from the force of her attack's impact. She smacked my Third Hand away with a powerful kick, then used the opening to thrust her sword at me.

Staring at the silver sword right in front of my face, I instinctively

took a big gulp. It wasn't a complete loss for me, though.

"Looks like a draw...," Claris announced as she noticed my Fourth Hand hovering at a standstill in front of *her* face. I had managed to force a stalemate.

I took her outstretched right hand and got up off the ground.

"This ended up a tie, but I feel like you had me dancing in the palm of your hand."

"You fell into my trap this time, but I think putting distance between us at the start and letting me have the initiative also gave me an advantage."

It was true that my chances of winning went down when my opponent maintained a certain level of distance from me. That was inevitable, since I had only a limited amount of long-ranged attacks available to me. I could throw rocks, for instance, but after sparring together on so many occasions, Claris knew what to expect. And if she was aware of what I would hurl at her, she would definitely be able to deal with it. On top of that, she also had barrier magic at her disposal, which she specialized in. Consequently, the only option available to me in these duels of ours was to try and close the gap between us.

"Man, it really comes down to distance, doesn't it...? I guess I should try out a bow?"

"I do think you'd be well-suited to bow wielding. A gun might work, too. The only thing is they both end up using a lot of money... Of course, I imagine being a son of the Hanamura family means cost may not be much of an obstacle."

I wasn't really worried about funds. Plus, when Marino had shown me the weapon storage, I'd confirmed that she already had some long-ranged armaments. Of course, there were far fewer of these than the number of wands and grimoires on offer. She'd told me I was free to use anything, so I could simply borrow my equipment from there.

"Bows and guns, huh...? Either way, it'll have to wait until next week."

"Next week...? That's right, you did mention you were entering the dungeon this week, didn't you?"

I pulled out my stole anew and arranged it into a shape so Claris could relax. First, I enhanced each end of the cloth, then intentionally loosened up the area in between. And presto! My simple hammock was finished.

"Takioto, um... Sorry if this sounds rude, but your mana reserves are frankly monstrous."

Although Claris seemed a bit hesitant, she slowly lowered herself into my cloth creation. Then, as she began to softly sway, her face broadened into a smile.

At that instant, I wagered I was the only person in the entire world

who yearned from the bottom of his heart for a spell to swap bodies with a stole. How I longed to be under her thumb (and by that, I meant her butt).

“Takioto?”

“S-sorry,” I said, then continued. “But it’s just the Beginner’s Dungeon anyway, so I don’t think I need to worry too much. Besides, I’ll have upperclassmen, adventurers, and instructors accompanying me this time.”

“With all due respect, even if it’s the Beginner’s Dungeon, remaining on guard is paramount...”

“Oh?” I said, unconsciously nodding along.

“Um, well, it’s a bit embarrassing, but when I entered my first dungeon, I got, um, unexpectedly shaken up...”

“You did?”

I felt bad but could easily imagine it happening.

“Yes, but the people I was with helped me, so it ended without incident. That’s why I think it’s prudent not to neglect your preparations. Um, forgive me if I’ve gone too far.”

Why was she apologizing? I was simply admiring her. Did I look angry to her?

“No, please, I’m not mad at all. If anything, I’m really grateful for the warning. Given my tendency to act rashly, your advice really hits home.”

All things considered, this wouldn’t be my first descent into a dungeon, though.

“You, act rashly...? You don’t strike me that way at all.”

To be honest, I regretted some of the hasty things I’d done back when I’d saved Ludie. Though I didn’t regret *saving* her in the slightest.

“Nah, there’s plenty of times I have. Anyway, thank you for the advice. I’ll be sure to prep well for my dungeon course the day after tomorrow.”

In reality, however, I’d already planned on thoroughly preparing myself for future incidents, since I knew what events were coming up.

“No need to thank me... With your skills, I believe you shouldn’t have any problems. Actually, even if you do have some issue, I think you’ll make it out okay.”

Thing was, though, the protagonist was going to cause an event that would go far beyond “some issues.” And getting wrapped up in it would put me in quite a bit of danger...

The bright sunlight blazed down from the cloudless blue sky.

It was still spring, so it wasn’t hot enough for me to break out into a sweat. Truth be told, it was an altogether pleasant day thanks to a

gently blowing breeze.

With weather like this, I would have liked to invite Yukine, Ludie, or Sis together for a picnic or camping trip, but Sis would probably shoot me a glare as if to say, *An outdoor barbecue? That's patented normie stuff.* Perhaps I could press her by suggesting maybe she would enjoy it if she tried it; maybe she would get really into it, even.

Contrary to these wonderful and exciting daydreams, however, we were unfortunately headed for a dungeon, a place where outdoor conditions were absolutely meaningless.

Since we would be heading into the Beginner's Dungeon this time around, the interior would consist of stone floors, like you'd see in an ancient temple, and corridors. I prayed that the temperature inside would be pleasant, but that wasn't something playing the game had ever informed me about.

"...That's all. Questions...anyone?" Sis confirmed with the students. She was simply going over things that had already been explained to us, so nobody had anything to ask.

"Okay. Good luck."

Her eyes flickered over to us before she turned around and headed off toward the field nurses' office, where the healers were all gathered.

"I didn't expect Hatsumi to show up today," Ludie noted, dropping her feigned princess speaking style, evidently assuming that either no one was around or that they wouldn't hear her here over all the commotion.

"Apparently, almost all the lecturers are participating. It seems like they had the option of skipping out, but Sis insisted on it. 'You and Ludie are joining, so I'll tag along,' she said."

"I don't really know how to describe it, but Hatsumi comes off as a bit of a misanthrope. Or like she's indifferent to other people... How would you describe her?"

"Me? Sure, Sis can be a bit apathetic, but she's kind, beautiful, tolerant, and patient..."

I got this far into my monologue when I felt her presence nearby, so I decided to lay the praise on extra thick.

"...She's always worried about me and is actually a really caring person who'll listen to even my most troublesome requests. She's the best sister in the world. Just being with her is a good time."

"...I'm so glad."

Ludie let out a yelp of surprise. She hadn't realized Hatsumi was nearby. Before I'd gotten used to her, there had been times when I hadn't sensed she was close until she was standing right next to me. She was undoubtedly the reason I'd gained access to the Sense Presence skill before even stepping foot in a dungeon. Claris had been part of that, too, though I had to wonder why she would have a thief

skill in the first place.

“Y-you frightened me. You should have said something if you were standing there, Hatsumi.”

Sis gently scratched the back of her head at Ludie’s rebuke.

“Stop; you’re embarrassing me.”

“I’m not quite sure there was anything about my comment to be bashful about...”

Right as Ludie found herself in a quandary, a voice called out to us.

“Heeey! Takioto, Ludie, Ms. Hatsumi.”

Appearing before us in her uniform with a naginata strapped to her back was Yukine Mizumori. She came up beside me, glanced at Ludie, and cocked her head to the side.

“Something the matter?” the elf asked.

“How can I describe it? It feels a bit like I’m considering the biological applications of the Pythagorean theorem,” Yukine stated.

“Sounds like they wouldn’t have anything to do with each other.”

I interjected by saying “Let’s just put that aside for a moment...” and cut off the conversation before continuing, “Actually, Sis, why’d you come over here? Looks like the groups are going to start being announced soon, and everyone’s started to move on.”

“I had something to tell you all. Something Yukine hasn’t been told, either.”

“What’s that?” Ludie asked, resigned to having her confusion unresolved.

“Now that everyone’s here, I’ll let you in on it. For this year’s first-year Beginner’s Dungeon course, you’ll be forming parties of five.”

“We already had that explained to us. Wait, weren’t you just talking about this earlier? You informed us that we’d be getting a message on the all-in-one data device we can utilize on campus, the Tsukuyomi Traveler, and that we were supposed to gather up with those members at an assigned location,” I recalled, taking out the smartphone-like device that was handed out to each student on their first day.

“...Right. Due to certain circumstances, you three won’t be getting that message.”

“Huh?”

“Excuse me?”

“I see. Why is that exactly, Ms. Hatsumi?”

“The three of you alone possess an excessive amount of combat prowess already. Mom and I made the decision to cap your party size.”

“Wait, does that mean...?” Ludie began, already inferring the answer.

“We’re having you challenge the labyrinth in a three-member group.”

“Huh?!”

“Um?!”

Each of our expressions clouded over.

Okay, just hold on a moment here. This was strange—very strange. Why wasn’t I getting grouped up with Iori? Up until now, I had acted entirely in accord with the game, like I was fulfilling a bizarre personal destiny, only for things to end up like this? And it would be *only* us three on top of all that?

“Ms. Hatsumi. Can you explain this to us in more detail?”

Yukine, most likely the only person in our party with a level head, questioned Sis. Ludie seemed surprised as well, but I was definitely the most shocked among us.

“We’re convinced that you, Kousuke, will have no trouble inside the dungeon because of your handling of the prior incident. Ludie’s also learned Shortened Incantation, and she even has intermediate-level magic at her disposal. Just the two of you would be plenty. And with Yukine Mizumori assigned to you, I don’t think there’s anything you need to fear.”

I mean, I understood where she was coming from. Thanks to Sis and Marino, Ludie was rapidly getting stronger. Besides, she’d already experienced combat in a labyrinth before. Thinking back on it, I’d also obtained a lot of magic particles from taking out that Heartless Ogre, so I could probably solo this section. Yukine joining us on top of that was plain overkill.

“Clearing this up for you all was my main motivation for coming here.”

“...We understand, Sis. So what are we supposed to do next?”

“If you’d like to dive right in, you can. There’s no set time for you to enter. We constructed the Beginner’s Dungeon to ensure you wouldn’t run into the other groups.”

At her reply, I stared at Ludie and Yukine, who both nodded to confirm they were good to go whenever.

“Okay, then. We’ll head in there right away.”

This was all well and good, but what about the event where Iori causes a demon to show up? *Whatever, it’s probably fine.* That monster was the first boss, so it would be a real pushover.

“Daaang...”

If I had to describe the labyrinth, I’d compare it to a stone temple, the kind that wouldn’t look out of place in Egypt or Rome. I knew it had this air to it from the in-game visuals, but its impressive presence was overwhelming in the flesh.

“Hey, Takioto, you’ve spent enough time here, right? We should get

going soon,” Yukine mentioned, turning her sights ahead of us. Following her gaze, I rested my eyes on an earthen door.

After consulting with Yukine and Ludie, I took up the vanguard. Yukine was in the middle. Finally, we decided to put Ludie in the back line. Yukine probably wouldn’t do much in this configuration; she was entrusting us with handling potential threats. This was all to say that I was standing at the very front... But I had to press forward...

“I don’t understand how to open this thing, Yukine.”

In front of us stood a stately door made of stone. It was close to thirty feet tall. It didn’t seem like even a full-strength push would make it budge an inch. Was it built for giants or something? There hadn’t been any entrances like this in the game. Actually, during the dungeon section, your view immediately switches into exploration mode. Perhaps this door had been omitted from the final game.

“Oh, this’ll open automatically if you touch it. It’s there since monsters will show up from here on out. I’m sure you’ll be fine, but make sure to brace yourselves.”

At her insistence, I touched my hand to the door.

When I did, the ground started to tremble as though there were an earthquake.

“Eep!”

Flustered, Ludie took her wand in her hand, and as she activated her mana, she grabbed on to my arm for some reason. The sudden rumbling took me by surprise as well, but since I’d been born in Japan, the earthquake capital of the world, and had experienced massive tremors inside a high-rise building before, it wasn’t very intense from my perspective.

Nevertheless, the trembling I felt from the pair of melons brushing up against my arm was quite considerable and caused my heart to quake far more than the ground at my feet.

Then came a mechanical whirring noise—*vrnnnn, vrnnnn, vrnnnn*—echoing around the area, and the rumbling grew more intense. I used my stole like a cane to maintain my balance and keep myself upright, but I would have had a hard time staying on my feet without it. Ludie concentrated her strength onto my arm, and an extremely panicked expression came over her visage. Yukine, on the other hand, seemed composed, casually placing an arm on my shoulder to keep her balance. *Hey, Yukine, look. My arm—my other arm—it’s free. Press against it; I wouldn’t mind.*

As I entertained these unattainable aspirations, the mechanical sound suddenly stopped, and the tremors slowly receded.

When the quake completely ceased, a noise like a switch clicking open rang out.

Glancing around the area again, I saw that an entrance that was just

about large enough for someone to pass through had formed in the corner of the door. This colossal door in front of us, with all the trembling of a catastrophic earthquake and some mysterious mechanical whirring sound, had created a portal large enough for a single individual. Was this thing just here for the ambience?

“This doesn’t make any sense...”

Her body still trembling, Ludie let go of my arm and vented her anger at the structure. Next to her, Yukine looked on with gentle nostalgia, as if to say, *I felt the exact same way my first time, too.*

The start ended up easing my nerves a bit, but were we really going to be okay?

If the Beginner’s Dungeon was the same as its in-game counterpart, then first of all, we were definitely not getting wiped out on the upper levels. As long as we had the right items, I didn’t even think the hidden boss on the eleventh layer would give us much trouble. In real-time attacks, players competed for the shortest clears possible (measured via a real-world timer) by maximizing their efficiency. The standard tactic was to collect treasure chests while only fighting the absolute minimum number of enemies until reaching and defeating the boss on the tenth layer. Even low-level characters could crush the boss, so it wasn’t a particularly difficult area.

When you first challenge this labyrinth, however, the followers of the Church of the Malevolent Lord summon a demon, and you’re forced to defeat it. It’s a weak one, though. Downright puny. After defeating the creature, one of the heroines casually quips, *“We’ve all been through a lot today, so why don’t we head back? Everyone’s tired, right?”* Despite that, it’s still not much of a problem to continue on from there and go down to the lowest level to defeat the boss.

If anything, to someone with real-time attack experience like myself, leaving the dungeon without reaching the final layer was out of the question. Nothing was a bigger waste of time than having to come back and descend to the final layer again.

But this time around, I wasn’t the protagonist, so the demon wasn’t an issue. All I had to do was quickly beat the tenth-floor boss and leave.

“Let’s see, the first layer only has carplins, right?”

“Carplins” referred to a monster with the body of a goblin fused with the head of a fish. It was impossible to properly convey just how small-fry these monsters were.

“That’s what we’ve been told,” Ludie replied, cautiously looking around the area. Carplins can shoot water blasts from their mouths, but they pack about as much of a punch as a kid’s water gun. Just enough to get your clothes wet, in other words. It’s the absolute

weakest move your foes can pull off, only dealing a single point of damage one out of every ten attacks. They are, however, necessary for obtaining some of the sexy CG scenes. Once you gain a tamer-class character who can control monsters, they're one of the highest-priority creatures to befriend.

"...! They're here!"

As I listened to Ludie's voice, I aimed my Third Hand toward the carplins that came into view. It looked like there was only one.

"Let's go!"

I erected a wall with my Third Hand, then immediately took off in a sprint. Deflecting the water blast flying toward us with my Third Hand, I slammed into it with my Fourth Hand.

"Caaar, caaarrr!"

Was combat...really this unsatisfying? The beast spasmed on the ground, still knocked down by my attack, until it finally dissolved, leaving behind the tiniest of magic stones before evaporating away. Then came time for magic particles to float into the air and divvy themselves up into three portions before we each absorbed them.

"...Weak, huh?"

"...Very."

"Well, Takioto, you've got a lot of firepower for a first-year. Probably why. Not to mention the prior dungeon incident."

These were far too weak compared with the monsters from the Palace of Worldly Impermanence.

I went to pick up the bead-like magic stone the carplin dropped and put it in my bag. Was it even worth collecting these, though?

"Okay, let's keep going."

Heeding Yukine's suggestion, we continued forward. I got the feeling we had all dropped our guard down a level.

"Quite the uniform landscape, isn't it? If it weren't a straight path, it'd be easy to get lost..." Ludie muttered. She was exactly right. The simple stone pillars and walls continued on endlessly, making it feel as though we were seeing the same scenery over and over again.

The only reason we weren't getting lost was because we only had one direction to head in. If the path did end up branching, we probably wouldn't even know where we were at any moment.

I didn't anticipate getting turned around from this point on, though. I knew this place. In *Magical ★Explorer*, this area's layout is entirely fixed except for a certain layer. I also knew that the path we had been walking down so far lined up exactly with the game's map.

"That's true. I shudder to think what a maze like this..."

I cut off mid-sentence. Then I beckoned Ludie over to me.

"I heard something from over there. It'll probably walk out from that corner."

She nodded and boosted her mana. From the intermittent “*caaar, caaar*” sounds that were approaching, I estimated our opponent hadn’t clued in to our presence...and apparently, I’d been right.

The moment the monster appeared from around the corner, Ludie pelted it with magic, and it dissolved into magic particles. I searched around a bit, but it seemed like there was no magic stone left over this time. Of course, it might have been so tiny that I overlooked it.

“Let’s go.”

I nodded. Still, why did the carplins mumble “*caaar, caaar*” to themselves anyway?

We steadily pressed onward. When we got to the second layer, monsters besides carplins began to rear their heads.

“Golems, huh?”

Before us stood roaming lumps of earth. I examined them from afar. With their slow movements and monotonous behavior, it seemed like it would be easy to shut out their blows by defending with either of my stole Hands. And just as I expected, I was, in fact, able to shut them out completely. It actually surprised me how effortlessly they went down.

“I think I’m a little *too* suited to fighting these guys,” I remarked while reaching down to pick up a small magic stone.

What clearly differed from our engagements with the carplins thus far was that the golems would actually come out and attack us like normal. “Attack like normal” might have been a weird way to put it, but it was the truth. I suppose that really demonstrated how unorthodox the carplins were.

“We’re still in the upper levels, after all.”

The fruits of Ludie mastering Shortened Incantation were also becoming clear to us; by all accounts, none of the combat for this assignment would give us much trouble.

We chatted as we continued on.

“Oh?”

Around halfway through the second floor, we arrived at our first fork in the road. Or rather, we *finally* reached it. If this had been one of Japan’s nationally renowned RPG series, it would definitely be raked over the coals for keeping us stuck to a single corridor like this.

“Which way do we go?”

Left or right. For this intersection, the left path was the correct route forward, while the right led to a dead end with a treasure chest. Actually, I imagined some people would consider the right route to be the better option. Even the speedrunning-inclined typically grabbed the loot. Still, it wasn’t strictly necessary, depending on the situation.

“Let’s see. If it doesn’t matter either way, let’s start with the right path.”

Ludie didn't have any preference. She and Yukine agreed with my suggestion, and we continued on forward.

Sure enough, we arrived at an expected dead end. A worn wooden box sat in front of the wall.

"Treasure, perhaps?"

"Probably. It's not booby-trapped, right?"

It actually wasn't. In fact, none of the chests in the whole dungeon had traps. I couldn't let them in on that, of course.

"I'm sure it's pointless to bother asking, but you don't have any scout skills, do you?"

"Nope. I'll just have to use my stole as a shield while I try opening it," I replied before looking over to Yukine. However, she didn't say a single word on the subject.

Solidifying my defenses with my Third Hand, I slowly opened the chest with my Fourth.

Inside was a small, red stone engraved with a magic circle.

"A fire magic stone."

"Looks like it."

These rocks emblazoned with emblems were known as magic sigil stones. When activated, they allowed you to use the magic sealed within the sigil. In this stone's case, applying mana to it and giving it a shake or a jolt would cause fire to spurt out of it...or so I had heard. I hadn't actually used one before, so I wasn't entirely sure what would happen if I did.

"Can I keep that?"

"You do seem like the one who'd need it the most, I suppose."

Ludie could already use fire magic. I, on the other hand, was lacking in long-ranged magic options. These sorts of items would be quite useful to me.

In my mind, magic sigil stones were one of the ways I could shore up my range deficiencies. Even someone who was incapable of using long-ranged magic like me would be able to activate it, this combination of magic circle and magic stone. Since I hadn't actually used one before, though, I couldn't really say one way or the other.

That said, magic sigil stones had their drawbacks.

The first was that they were expensive. You could only find these rare rocks inside the dungeons. Their prices skyrocketed once you got to the mid-level stones and beyond.

The second was that they were consumables. One use would drain all the stone's mana, reducing it to a normal mineral. This also played into their high price tags.

The third and final reason was their lack of firepower. By the time you could obtain the strongest magic sigil stones, Ludie and other caster characters were slinging spells that were already much more

formidable, and thus more useful. Purchasing mana recovery items was an overwhelmingly cheaper alternative to investing in magic sigil stones.

In conclusion—they were generally a make-do item, limited in use.

“All right, suppose we should head back.”

“Yeah.”

The third and fourth layers looked almost exactly the same as the second. However, there was a major change in the monsters that appeared. The carplins vanished, replaced by groups of multiple golems at once. On top of this, a new variety of monster started to show up.

“A normal goblin, huh?”

From a Japanese aesthetic standpoint, the creature’s appearance could only be described as hideous. Its body was covered in wrinkles, and it was gaunt to the point that its ribs and other bones were visible. Worse still, its eyes bulged so far out from their sockets that they seemed diseased; about a third of the eyeball was exposed to the air. Its tongue dangled from its mouth, with drool trickling down from it. It wrapped a single rag about its waist and held a club in hand. Although its armor was essentially paper-thin, its weapon was something I would need to be careful of.

In the game, the difficulty also ramps up from the third floor onward. Nevertheless...

I grabbed the club with my Third Hand as it swung downward. Then I sent the monster flying headfirst with a blow from my Fourth Hand.

“Gobbb.”

“I really couldn’t be any better suited to this place.”

Moreover, since I’d been doing combat drills with Claris, there was no chance any of their slow, predictable hits would strike me. It kind of felt like duking it out with a baby.

After collecting their magic stones, I returned to where my companions were.

“I would be having a hard time by this point if I were on my own... Perhaps it’d be best for me to learn some close-ranged techniques, too,” Ludie remarked. But she was fundamentally a caster-type character, not a melee-ranged unit. She only needed a few techniques to push back any attacks, and she could leave things to the rest of her party. When she learned Void Incantation later on, she would be able to fire off spells left and right anyway. But the question was how I should go about explaining this to her.

“I mean, I think a bare minimum amount is necessary, but... Wouldn’t it be better to push the long-ranged magic you’re skilled with as far as it’ll go? I can keep most monsters off of you, too.”

I was speaking under the assumption that I would be with her in this hypothetical scenario, but...I didn't worry about it.

"Hmm... That's true."

If I was free to build her up myself, I would take the optimal route. But if I'd shouted something like *I know your optimal build* as though it was perfectly normal, I'd probably come off like I had brain worms or something.

"Your long-distance incantations do bear a striking resemblance to the student council president's, actually," Yukine concurred, breaking the silence she'd fallen into after we started seriously tackling the dungeon.

"I never really committed to any one thing, so I grew up to be just good enough at everything instead. But I believe you have an affinity for long-ranged magic, Ludie. Judging from your mana, you have the base to cast the highest-level spells, and I think you'll be able to match or even exceed the abilities of the student council president and people on her level."

I do need to clarify that when Yukine insisted she "never really committed to any one thing," what she meant was that she was top-class with everything. That's what distinguished her from the normal type of person who "never really commits to any one thing."

"I'll give it some more thought."

"If you want advice on a direction to take, I'm always here to lend an ear. But when it comes to magic, there's Yukine—"

Even as I wholly thrust the responsibility on her shoulders, she nodded with a smile.

"Yup. I'll teach you anything I can. Though for you two, it's probably better to have the principal or Ms. Hatsumi teach you instead."

In Ludie's case, she'd probably feel right at home with them. Even with their slightly quirky looks and personalities, they were both top-level magic-users.

Right now, she'd already learned more skills than her in-game counterpart. That was great progress in my book.

It really came down to your environment. That was important for sports and studying, too. I couldn't say that it would guarantee anything, though.

"Perhaps I'll talk with Marino and Hatsumi... Wait, that's clearly just maintaining the status quo, isn't it?"

Ludie looked at me as she spoke. I didn't understand what she was trying to tell me.

"The way I see it, the status quo is already producing more than satisfactory results, though..."

When I vocalized my thoughts, Yukine appeared to have gotten

Ludie's message. She murmured something in realization.

"I get what you're trying to say, Ludie. I get it *very* well. I experienced the same thing. It's embarrassing to admit, but I've let my impatience drive me before, too."

"....."

Ludie didn't say a word. She simply stared at Yukine in silence, her hands balled into fists.

"For me... Well, I'll talk about it afterward," Yukine said, bringing the topic to a close. I hadn't been able to confirm it for sure, but it appeared there were enemies headed our way.

We soon discovered a group of goblins.

I spurred Ludie on to use her magic, and she immediately began her incantation.

"Storm Hammer!"

Her chant drew to a close, and she cast her spell. A colossal green hammer appeared in front of the goblins and swung down on them.

A gust of wind radiated out from where the hammer struck as it produced a deafening sound upon impact. Like its name and appearance suggested, Storm Hammer was an intermediate-level offensive spell, physical in nature. You couldn't learn it without the ability to use both wind and earth magic, but as long as you didn't have to worry about your mana consumption, it ranked as one of the most powerful intermediate incantations. It was so strong that I didn't really understand why it wasn't categorized in a higher tier of spells.

Wait a minute. Outside of a repeat playthrough, it shouldn't have been possible for her to learn it at this point in the game...

Regardless, Storm Hammer's power naturally lay in its downward swing, but it was the gust of wind that came afterward that caused the most trouble of all.

The two goblins the spell had struck directly succumbed instantaneously, then dissipated into dust. Meanwhile, the creatures that had been nearby collided with a wall, blown away by the gust of wind that resulted from the hammer's impact. One of the goblins that had been flung with particular force now lay dead on the ground.

The gale also buffeted the goblins that were farther away, knocking them on their backsides to leave them wide open.

"Phew, that does it."



Crushed beneath the swing of my Third and Fourth Hands, the goblin let out its last gasp of breath as it began disintegrating away.

“I really am jealous of your magic, Ludie. I can’t do anything like that.”

Those were the spells I would want to try out if I could. She’d used Storm Hammer against me a number of times in our mock battles, but it took me a lot of effort to defend against it. The absolute best thing about it, though, was that the wind it released would flip up Claris’s and Sis’s skirts while they were refereeing our match. Black really was the sexiest.

As I was coveting Ludie’s skills—

“The grass is always greener on the other side, huh?” Yukine muttered, looking on from nearby.

—*Yukine’s Perspective*—

How is she for real? The first time I had that thought, it was about my own older sister.

She was a first-rate magic-user and a martial arts maven. For that reason, I was always behind her, forever losing to her. Though she was two years older, I couldn’t see myself reaching her current level in two years’ time, and since she seemed to be growing even more than I was, I even believed that my whole future would be spent in her shadow.

“You’re a genius, Yukine. Believe me.”

My sister would always say this. But I’d sensed otherwise. My father and mother poured all their affection into her, not me. They must have both fallen in love with the way she wielded her katana. It was painfully apparent why they had no interest in me. After all, no one was more fascinated by her technique than I was.

She was a genius.

Her magic skills would be impressive enough, but I knew I would never surpass her with the blade as long as I lived. I didn’t think myself completely bereft of talent. But that very fact was precisely why I wielded a naginata. The inadequacy of my lukewarm gift with a katana only served to emphasize my sister’s incredible skills compared with mine. This was the first time I’d ever run away.

My sister was the first person whose mere existence baffled me; Takioto was the fourth. After entering the Academy, being awestruck by Student Council President Monica and her wolf-in-sheep’s-clothing nature, and observing someone like the principal, who was sure to go down in history, I didn’t believe anyone could surprise me anymore. But I was stunned nevertheless.

He was abnormal. Both physically and mentally abnormal.

Takioto had self-deprecatingly referred to himself as a magic storage

tank, but he was far more than that. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to describe his ever-increasing stores of energy as a source of mana, as the Dragon Vein itself. To be honest, I was relieved when I'd heard he couldn't use long-ranged incantations. But knowing now how much this weighs on him, I feel disturbed at this relief. I even hope I will be able to assist him somehow. And yet I can't help but wonder occasionally—what exactly would happen if someone with even more mana than the principal chose to release their magic with evil intentions? Now, however, I can firmly say he would never stoop to that level, even if he could use long-distance spells.

Takioto's mana was supernatural, but what of his weapon skills? To be frank, I hadn't sensed the slightest bit of talent watching him wield a katana. It was the same with every other weapon he used. His swordsmanship was commonplace, the kind you could find in any novice.

Although I'd recommended that he try it out, another part of me wanted to make him quit. Nevertheless, I was truly glad I didn't. He possessed abilities that others did not. One was his capacity for streamlining and optimization, and the other was his almost abnormal amount of willpower.

I think back to the events of that day even now. He had asked to borrow a training sword and started rattling off practice swings as soon as I handed it over. Perhaps my demands on him were too high after what I had seen from my sister, but he was utterly bereft of talent. That was my reaction.

However, a few days later, I beheld him in amazement. His practice swings had morphed from those of a beginner to those of a seasoned practitioner. Still, after crossing blades against each other, it was clear to me that he was indeed bereft of true talent after all.

In my surprise, I asked him exactly how he polished his skills so rapidly.

"Huh? I've just been doing practice swings, really," he replied, puzzled, as though the answer was obvious.

There was no way that was all he'd been doing.

I was perplexed. Although he was typically sharp and quick-witted, he could be thickheaded in the strangest of ways. I asked the principal to fill me in on his abnormal learning speed.

"He spent the whole day swinging the katana in the same way, over and over. Occasionally, he'd film himself and fine-tune his stance, too."

"That's it?" I couldn't help but reply.

"Well, when I say Kou 'spent the whole day' doing that, I mean he spent every free moment doing practice swings, for one, and that he kept this up until he went to sleep. All while keeping his enhancement

magic going the whole time, too.”

Hearing this left me dumbfounded.

Enhancement magic wasn't something you could use nonstop. I had a difficult time keeping it going, and it was probably impossible for even Principal Marino to use it constantly. Not only that, but he'd kept at his training at the same time. It was peculiar. Like constantly running at a sprint. He did that for a whole day?

Nevertheless, I'd thought.

Between standard practice swings and practice swings with enhancement magic, the latter would grant him more experience. Up until now, his aptitude had been the stuff of legends, but now it was an undeniable matter of fact.

An idea struck me—

What would happen if he keeps this up forever?

Suddenly, I found myself tightly gripping my clothes. As I released my hold, finger by finger, I realized my hands were covered with sweat. He could probably learn one of the ultimate secret techniques of the Kyohachi-ryu. A technique so distinct and peculiar that even my older sister had been told it would be impossible for her to learn.

From then on, I desperately encouraged Takioto to pursue the katana. As time passed, I wanted to believe that the slightly stiffened expression he developed was just my imagination. But ultimately, I needed to face reality. He had been slightly put off. Even if he recoiled a little from my desperation, however, I was glad I'd encouraged him.

Bending the stole to his will, he repelled the downward swing from the club. Shielding himself with the cloth's right side and repelling the sword with its left, he unsheathed his blade at the defenseless body.

Iai—

A fundamental, even quintessential component of the art of the katana. It was a technique that almost anyone could use. However, there was a vast gulf in the power of the technique between a beginner and an expert swordfighter. For every novice unable to slice through armor, there was a katana wielder capable of cutting through dragon scales and mithril. Apparently, there had been some capable of rending iron with a wooden sword alone.

Had he really only just started wielding the blade? After witnessing my sister's mastery so many times, was I truly having difficulty keeping track of his swing with my naked eyes, at this short of a distance? Takioto really was a strange one.

“Wait, seriously? With just one attack?” Ludie commented with surprise after he'd safely downed the goblin henchmen. The Hobgoblin, cleanly sliced in two, disappeared into dust and magic stones before it had time to feel any pain.

A dry smile stretched across my lips. The Hobgoblin, lord of the

tenth layer, with which Shion and I had endured a hard-fought engagement to defeat, had been felled in a single strike. Not only that, but he had finished it off on his very first dungeon dive. But I had expected this result from the moment he had overwhelmed the leader of the fifth layer.

This should have been an event worth celebrating, yet Ludie headed over to Takioto with a look of frustration on her face.

“You better save some of it for me.”

“Listen, we’re not dealing with candy here...”

The elf found it incomprehensible. It was only natural, really, given how much she’d hyped herself up before the start of the fight, only to have Takioto finish it off in a single maneuver. Though I was confident that a direct hit from her Storm Hammer would have finished it off in one attack, too.

Watching Ludie force Takioto into treating her to ramen as an apology, I interjected.

“I’ll buy you both a bowl. That was a fantastic dungeon clear, truly.”

Takioto beamed at my words, and Ludie appeared somehow both happy and dissatisfied at once. I chided her, and we continued deeper inside the chamber. At the end sat a single wooden box. Ludie opened it, and after taking the magic stones inside and confirming with Takioto, she stowed them away in her subspace storage bag.

On our way to the spatial magic circle that would take us back to the start, he whispered something strange to the Tsukuyomi Traveler device in his hand.

“...I don’t know how much time I can shave off, but I guess I’ll speedrun it.”

I couldn’t understand a word of that, but I entered the magic circle without asking him. Whatever it was, I could try inquiring about it when we were out getting food.

Back at the entrance, we gave our report to an anxious and fidgety instructor. Peering around the area as I spoke, I could see that they weren’t the only one behaving unusually.

“—and they cleared down to the tenth layer. Nothing more to report... Also, everyone seems to be in a bit of a commotion. Did something happen?”

The instructor started with a “Well, since you’re the vice president of the Morals Committee...” before quietly telling me:

“Actually...we’ve been told a demon has appeared inside the dungeon.”

It seemed that my congratulatory gift of ramen would have to wait.

Glancing at the teachers running around in hurry, Ludie and I decided

to head back to the house for the moment. Needless to say, the celebratory meal on Yukine's dime had been canceled. Given the situation, though, there wasn't much else we could do. From what I could tell, the demon was stirring up trouble. In the game, this moment encompasses but a brief one-sentence summary: *"Demons appeared, and it became the talk of the whole Academy."*

Right after we got back home, I immediately got changed to go running. When I told Ludie, who was relaxing, that I was going out, she grimaced at me.

"...You're not going running, are you?"

"Yup."

Of course I was.

"Even though we just got back from a dungeon? Aren't you exhausted?"

If I had to say one way or the other, I was indeed tired. However.

"Not worn out enough that I can't handle a run or some practice swings."

Baffled, she shook her head before stretching her arms up high and getting up.

"What's up?"

"I'm going to train, myself."

Following her surprising reply, she summoned Claris and departed, wand in hand.

I didn't find Yukine along my jogging route or by the waterfall. Not that I had expected her to be in those places, of course. After witnessing her opt to stay behind with a grave expression on her face, I could tell she wouldn't be leaving until she'd resolved the situation. In truth, though, the demon had only attacked the protagonist's party; everything else the instructors said had been baseless speculation. I prayed that she'd be able to get home soon.

"The protagonist is drawing the eyes of the Three Committees over there, probably."

The first playthrough of the game ends with you only attracting their attention. Of course, simply getting them to notice you is already incredible (per Takioto's in-game advice). On the second playthrough, they can potentially invite the protagonist to join them, depending on the situation, but...I doubted that would happen this time around. If Iori ended up getting inducted into a committee, then I would need to kick the pressure up a notch on my end.

Arriving at the bottom of the waterfall, I began to practice manipulating my Third and Fourth Hands. Once I'd trained with them enough, I moved on to practice swings. I would do at least a thousand for now...and then keep going until it started getting dark.

That settled, I swung the sword Yukine had provided me for

training, which held additional weights inside its blade. Then, picturing her form in my head, I swung again. Feeling as though something was slightly off on my right side, I slightly adjusted my posture before swinging another time.

Once my swings started stabilizing, I reflected back on everything that had happened up to that point. If I were being graded on the flow of things from the start of the game to the first dungeon visit, I would basically get a flawless A+. I'd learned most of the skills available to me, and thanks to Sis being the way she was, my Sense Presences ability proved even more beneficial than I expected.

Additionally, I'd mastered the almost-mandatory Mind's Eye ability, albeit through a questionable avenue. Iori seemed to be growing strong on his own, so there wasn't particularly anything else for me to say.

What a smooth start it had been. It was going so smoothly that it actually began to make me nervous.

If I was going to plan ahead, I would need to prioritize fully clearing the Beginner's Dungeon first and foremost. Once I cleared the eleventh layer and obtained all the skills it granted, I could head for the labyrinths outside the Academy. Since I'd already run through the ten layers of the Beginner's Dungeon, I should be qualified to explore other areas.

But where should I start? Personally, I wanted to dive into an extra dungeon that's included in the limited edition of the game. That one has a peculiar clear bonus, however, and there was a possibility I wouldn't be able to obtain it. If that was the case, it might not prove beneficial.

Marino and Sis came back well after dinner had ended, around the time of night when late-night anime came on TV. Noticing the seldom-seen look of exhaustion on both their faces (though Ludie still seemed unable to read Sis's expressions and must have thought she looked the same as always), I brought them both cups of coffee filled with a hefty amount of milk and sugar. They each thanked me before taking a sip.

"All that investigating, and in the end, we still don't know much about what caused it."

"Thankfully, the students were safe."

According to the two of them, only the protagonist's group met the demon. That's the way it plays out in the game, too. Thanks to Student Council President Monica being with them, the situation had been resolved without incident. Since she was there, I assumed she annihilated the monsters without the protagonist or his other party members lifting a finger. Unlike Yukine, Monica is overpowered from the very start of the game up to the end credits. In fact, Yukine is the only member of the Big Three who isn't overpowered from the get-go,

so she's actually in the minority.

Unfortunately, there was a problem.

"To confirm it's safe, we're sealing up the Beginner's Dungeon."

Sis dispassionately began to explain.

Apparently, they had managed to capture someone behaving suspiciously, but they were still investigating the area in case anything dangerous was still there. It was a valid course of action, really. Valid but disappointing. There were skills I wanted to gain from there before going to any of the others, so it looked like I was stuck.

Additionally, they were in the middle of interrogating the person they'd captured. But they'd also announced that they were going to consider it connected to the Tréfle Empire in some way, so they'd probably pegged the person to be a believer of the Malevolent Lord. Maybe they'd already established it as fact.

Since it was the day after the incident, the whole Academy was swept up in gossiping about what had transpired in the Beginner's Dungeon. According to Yukine, we would have otherwise been the target of everyone's attention. Clearing the tenth floor on a first trip was a seldom-seen triumph, but due to the demon incident, the school hadn't released the information about who'd cleared which floors to the student body.

Under normal circumstances, the results would have been posted publicly in a ranking list, which would be displayed in the Tsukuyomi Traveler, the Academy's all-in-one data service, but such was the way things were. Additionally, although the identity of who'd encountered the demon was supposed to have been kept a secret, the information got out somehow, so Iori's party became the center of attention. All eyes were on him in particular.

Some of the upperclassmen seemed to think very highly of him, and there were already signs to show it.

"Hey, people have come to see you, Iori."

The orange-haired male student chimed in after I spoke:

"Geez, look at you, Mr. Popular! Okay, so which one's your type? They're both pretty handsome."

Saying this, he put his arm over Iori's shoulder and nudged against him. Orange had ended up being in Iori's party in my stead, and they'd grown friendlier because of it. I didn't feel any reservations about the two of them. He's one of the characters who joins your party in the game, too.

As we both peppered him with questions, Iori furrowed his brow, appearing wholly uncomfortable.

"Both of them are dudes; come on, guys. Besides, I feel like Tréfle is

half of their reason for showing up...”

They were both, in fact, pretending to focus on Iori while staring at Ludie instead. The protagonist was an excuse to come sneak a peek at the elf princess.

I couldn't tell if Ludie had realized this or not. Regardless, she was engrossed in her chitchat with Katorina. The people vying to see the elven princess were really gifted with a sight to behold—not only did they get a glimpse of Ludie, but there was also another pretty girl right next to her.

“Oh yeah, you also went into the dungeon with Iori's group, right, Orange? How was it? Especially with the demon and stuff.”

“Huh? Orange...? Ah, whatever. Well, I was bit scared when it showed up, but... Iori was surprisingly reliable. Katou wasn't too bad, either.”

“Wait, ‘surprisingly’...?”

Based on his appearance alone, I guess he didn't seem like he would come up big when it counted. He was usually so exceedingly normal that he didn't leave much of an impression at all.

“All right then, how was the student council president?”

“The president? That girl's unreal, let me tell you. An absolute monster, right, Iori?”

“Yeah, even up against a demon... It was like watching an adult fight a child. The monster was so outmatched that I kinda felt bad for it.”

Welp, the president's overpowered abilities were alive and kicking, then.

“On top of that, she's so dang pretty and really nice, too. Totally makes sense why she's got that fan club of hers.”

“Heck, I even considered joining MMM for a moment myself.”

Both of them sang her praises. *Wait a second, though, Orange. If I recall your taste in women correctly...*

“So you're a President Monica fan, then, Orange?”

“Nah, she's really great, sure, but she doesn't get me going. She's at least gotta get past thirty first.”

Iori's face stiffened as the other boy replied. I didn't blame him; I, too, had been taken aback when he'd first revealed his taste in women. That being said, best friend and buddy characters in eroge usually have a trait that prevents them from getting together with any of the heroines. In Orange's case, it was his cougar fetish.

“It's gotta be the math lecturer for me.”

“O-oh yeah? Y-you don't say.”

Hey, Iori, you know your face is twitching something fierce, right?

“She's real sexy, huh? I'm planning on hitting her up, you know.”

“O-oh... Well, don't go too hard, okay?”

It really was hilarious, honestly. In girls' romance manga, the rival characters tempt the guys, or the guy dangles other girls in front of the main character to make her jealous, but eroge have the best friend character draw a line in the sand to declare that they won't lay a hand on any of the heroines. Both of these archetypes are on entirely different ends of the spectrum. Though I suppose for most of the middle-aged men playing the game, girls' romance manga was already an extreme opposite to begin with.



CONFIG

This is just my personal opinion, but I believe that in order to receive something, you need to pay some kind of price in return. It may not amount to an equivalent exchange. Paying a slightly higher price to achieve lesser rewards is a possibility.

However, if that trade-off felt like a pittance to you, then you wouldn't debate paying it at all.

That was precisely why I'd thrown aside my math and other general education courses, together with my teachers' esteem, and now stood before the Beginner's Dungeon. Class was in session, so there were no other students around. It was far too early for my classmates, backs against the wall, to ignore their morning classes in favor of dungeon diving, so the lack of people was expected if anything.

Taking up my student ID, I poured mana into it to display its contents. After I showed it to the man at the front desk, he pursed his lips and gazed at the writing displayed on my card with a disapproving "hmm."

His conflicted expression most likely stemmed from the fact that, while the dungeon had been declared safe, he was still reluctant to allow a first-year student to venture in alone. Either that, or he was confused as to why someone who had already cleared the tenth layer would want to go into the Beginner's Dungeon again.

It was probably both. His stern expression, as though he had a fish bone stuck in his throat, remained unchanged, but he still let me through without a word.

Before I stepped into the magic circle, I readied my Tsukuyomi Traveler. There, I opened up the stopwatch app and started the timer as I activated the spatial magic circle.

The most important thing with speedruns was how exactly to cut down on wasted time. Generally, what wastes time in-game is combat with trash mobs. Of course, you'd fight them when you needed experience points, but it's standard practice to ignore them. Instead, you fight enemies in areas where you can efficiently grind experience points.

For this visit, I had absolutely no need to save up magic particles, so

I passed by all the enemies and continued toward the next layer.

“Caaar, caaar.”

I glanced at a few dumbfounded carplins as I rushed past them before descending farther into the depths. I made sure to pick up any items as I went, though.

Now, in the game, I'd been able to run through the dungeon without any breaks, but this was impossible in the real world. Running for miles on end without a break? Obviously unfeasible. On top of ragged breathing and stiff legs, there was ultimately the chance that my distraction would lead to being ambushed. This was precisely why breaks were necessary. But where would I go to take one? The area where the three of us had eaten lunch and chatted for a while? No, not there. I needed to take a bit of a detour to reach that location. In that case...

“Yeah, gotta be the boss battle, huh?”

Catching my breath, I proceeded to deal with the fifth layer's boss, a goblin brandishing a sword and shield (the Goblin Knight). Not only could I beat it with low-effort swings of my Third and Fourth Hands, but the monster also respawned after a few minutes, which would let me re-collect the magic particles and the items it left behind, too. While I didn't need the experience, if I needed to take a breather, this seemed like the best way to do it. This would have been a whole lot easier if I had a vehicle; that way I could make progress without exerting myself. Unfortunately, I had no such luxury at the moment.

The trash mobs got much more annoying from the sixth floor on. I was up against flying monsters. If Ludie or Yukine were still here, it wouldn't be an issue, but I was poorly suited to clashing with them. Since their attacks never made it through to me, there was no chance I would lose to them, but I needed to cut down on wasted time. Naturally, I fled from them.

Pressing on, I sprinted through the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth layers before finally arriving at the tenth. The scenery, however, was not the same as it had been when we'd confronted the Hobgoblin.

I took out my Tsukuyomi Traveler and paused my stopwatch.

“One hour, twenty-six, huh? Plenty of time to make it under the two-hour mark.”

You could access this special floor if you arrived there within a certain time frame. It looked like I had managed to make it.

In contrast to the normal tenth layer, which consisted solely of a boss room, this special area was a maze—and an extremely troublesome one at that. The gentlemen playing through it for the first time relied on paper notes at their sides to clear it. However, once you knew all its nooks and crannies and were confident in your ability to speedrun it, a maze with a fixed pattern was just another straight path

to the end.

The special floor of the Beginner's Dungeon has eight possible variations. Each contains numerous points of divergence, and several of the maps are constructed into an infinite loop—it's a brutal layout. I had an awfully difficult time clearing it on my first playthrough before I consulted a walkthrough. The one saving grace is that it's free of monsters.

To get to my goal, the eleventh layer, I needed to go from the first floor all the way past the end of the tenth level's bonus area to the boss on the eleventh layer, all within two in-game hours. The time limit began from the moment I entered the dungeon, of course. Incidentally, to get to the special floor on the tenth layer, you needed to reach it within an hour and forty minutes; any slower, and you would be transported to the Hobgoblin boss room.

After catching my breath, I ran straight forward.

The first divergence came at a forked intersection. Without any hesitation, I continued down the eastern path until I came to a four-way intersection. Continuing down the northern route, I hit another four-way split. *Okay, pattern D. Now, in that case...from here on, it's east, south, west, south, south, east, north.*

Running through each fork in the path without a second thought, I eventually stumbled upon a spatial magic circle placed on the ground at a dead end ahead of me.

"Bingo."

After checking the time, I stepped onto the device.

Awaiting me at my destination was a golem made of wood. Its colossal frame, a humanoid shape constructed from an assemblage of several logs, towered over me at nearly ten feet tall. If a baby giant were to make a person out of lumber, this was probably what it would look like. The bushy growth of brown leaves where its hair would be made it appear even more like a human.

Now then, how was I going to defeat it? By using items, duh.

Producing the fire sigil stones I'd obtained earlier, I took aim at Wood Golem and activated them. One was the stone I'd found with Ludie and Yukine; the other I'd gotten during this current visit. Using two was quite the splurge.

When I activated them, both items glowed as they formed magic circles, then sent two fireballs rocketing toward Wood Golem. The moment both spells found their mark, my opponent's body went up in flames.

There were three kinds of Wood Golem: brown-leaved varieties made from deadwood, a green-leaved variant, and iterations without leaves to speak of. They were all weak to fire, but brown-leaved golems were especially vulnerable; a barrage of beginner fire magic

could easily bring them low.

Naturally, I couldn't use this magic, and depending on the situation, some speedrun protagonists wouldn't be able to use it, either. Fortunately, however, there are fire sigil stones lying around this dungeon, just begging you to use them on this hidden boss. I would've been a fool *not* to use them.

I enchanted my Third Hand with earth element magic and socked the blazing Wood Golem. Then, after just a single punch, the creature collapsed to the ground. As it writhed, trying to extinguish the flames, I followed up with blow after blow after blow.

It didn't even take me a full minute to subdue the monster.

I collected the magic stones it left behind and continued deeper into the boss room, where a statue of a winged woman was located. When I stopped in front of it, a voice echoed in my head.

—Thou hast done well to come this far. To commend thy deeds, I shall bestow this ability upon thee...

At this, my body slowly started to glow.

—The skill of Hyper Thought. Go and strive for more.

At the same moment as the words echoed in my head, a magic circle appeared beneath my feet. Before I could realize what was happening, I warped back to the entrance to the Beginner's Dungeon.

"Awww yeah!"

I balled my hand into a fist and pumped it into the air. I'd wanted to learn this skill at all costs, so obtaining it put me one step closer to my goal.

I took out my Tsukuyomi Traveler and checked the time. It had been eight o'clock when I entered, and it was now nine forty. That meant a single run through the area took about one hundred minutes in total. A respectable final time.

"Okay, then."

Now that I had managed to clear the eleventh floor of the Beginner's Dungeon...

"Time to go through it one more time!"

If the skills available in the Beginner's Dungeon lined up with the ones you could find there in the game, there should be five altogether. There were three that would be useful for me, the first of which was the Hyper Thought, which I'd just received. This god-tier skill boosts all stats at once and is absolutely required to develop the game's strongest characters. Since no unit is barred from learning the ability, it isn't an exaggeration to say that no one should be without it by the endgame.

The skill I received after my second blitz through the Beginner's

Dungeon was Increase Stamina (Small). In the game, this thing has almost no effect whatsoever, only raising a character's stamina by a slight amount. From a purely combat-focused perspective, it's honestly unnecessary. It is, however, extremely valuable during trademark eroge scenes that often arise at night in a game filled with beautiful girls. There's even a heroine whom you can't woo unless you pass a certain stamina threshold, and I'm sure many gentlemen pick it up specifically with her in mind.

Still, in this world, a video game reality, I estimated that it might turn out to be super beneficial.

"I'll have to investigate how much farther it lets me run later."

Checking the timer, I found that the run had taken a hundred and ten minutes. Perhaps I was a bit worn out, since it was my second loop. My speed had dropped a bit.

"It's about lunchtime anyway, so I'll grab a bite...and head right back into the maze!"

Since I'd managed to get two of the skills I was aiming for back-to-back, I was in high spirits heading toward the cafeteria.

When Marino wasn't busy (almost never), she would prepare a boxed lunch for me. More often than not, however, I would buy something from the school cafeteria and have lunch there. Marino obviously had her hands full with the recent demon incident, and Sis looked pretty busy, too.

"What were you doing all morning, Kousuke?"

"Training, obviously. What else?"

Meeting up with Iori, who had diligently attended class, I reserved my lunch on my Tsukuyomi Traveler and picked up the combo I'd bought. Iori had apparently reserved his lunch through the Tsukuyomi Traveler as well, so he immediately went to pick it up.

"Huh...?"

He gave an exasperated sigh. I couldn't really blame him—skipping class to train wasn't something that would normally cross your mind.

I glanced over at his grub and saw that he had a slightly more extravagant selection on his plate than usual.

"Oh, your lunch set rank went up, huh?"

"Yeah, they gave me a ton of Tsukuyomi Points for putting that demon down. Though I was only able to defeat it with President Monica's help."

Tsukuyomi Points were a kind of currency that could be used at Tsukuyomi Magic Academy. These points were given out when the school would buy the various magic stones and items students got in the dungeons. Points were also awarded when you first cleared a dungeon, to those with a record-breaking dungeon clear, and to individuals who produced good research results. Clearing down to the

tenth layer on my first visit had awarded me with a quite a bit of cash for a first-year student, too.

“That explains the luxury lunch.”

It felt like a bit of a waste, but spending points on lunch was barely a blip on the radar.

Incidentally, I didn't use Tsukuyomi Points to buy my lunch, but rather money Marino had added to my account, which was managed separately from the points. The amount of cash she'd provided me was enough to get several thousand orders of the most expensive meal combo available. This was apparently “a year's worth” to her. I mean, there was no way I was ever going to use all this up.

Apparently, it was also impossible to directly convert money into Tsukuyomi Points. You could buy magic tools and exchange them for points, however. In the game, you generally only use Tsukuyomi Points, so that factoid surprised me.

“Your grub is always real extravagant, though, Kousuke...”

Honestly, I wanted him to just think of it as being born to different circumstances and give up on it. When I thought on it, the system clearly favored students with money and power. Furthermore, I felt like most of the top-ranking students at the Academy hailed either from a noble family, some wealthy business owner, or other such backgrounds.

“I'm a growing boy, after all.”

Moments like these called for my strategy of purposefully playing it off with some random, meaningless response. I guess it was probably fine to tell him that I got cash from my adopted mom, but the explanation process would mean I'd have to talk about my real parents being dead.

I didn't need to make the atmosphere heavy like that.

“So anyway, how was class?”

“Hmm. How should I put it...? Normal, I guess? Oh, that reminds me, though.”

“Reminds you of what?”

Iori stopped eating and considered his next statement with apparent difficulty.

“Well, it's just... Some people in class were bad-mouthing you...”

“Ohhh, I mean, I sympathize with 'em. Mostly about Ludie, right?”

One thing that I couldn't feel in-game but now felt in real life was people's glares and their animosity.

Ludie was tremendously popular on campus, enough to have her fan club of imperial cavaliers, LLL. Since I was close with her to some extent, her fans already couldn't stand the sight of me. Part of it also stemmed from the fact that she generally hid her true self at school by acting elegant and standoffish, and yet they would often see her

chatting to me for some reason.

Though, honestly, given everything that had happened, I didn't really know what I could do about it.

Thus, both new students and upperclassmen alike switched from envious looks to glares filled with resentment when they saw us. There were even times when they would hit me with their mana, too.

"That's part of it, but...there's stuff like today, when you cut class. And you barely attend afternoon courses, too... Some people are starting to call you an underachiever..."

All of these points were, indeed, undeniably true.

"Well, honestly, I'd say they're right on the mark."

Without any way to defend myself, I had to surrender to his appraisal. There were merciless facets to education, too.

"And now the gossip has even ballooned from that. I heard someone say something like, 'Guys sullyng the school like him should get kicked out'... Though, from what I've seen, they belonged to LLL..."

I get it; seeing me be friendly with Ludie made them want to run me out of the school, huh?

Even if I did end up getting expelled, there was no way I could envision Ludie giving her heart to them, but...the rumors weren't causing any actual harm, so it might be better to bet on them all blowing over.

"That so, huh? Sorry. Couldn't have been great having to hear all that."

"Oh, no, forget me. What about you...?"

This kind of pointless envy was something you could naturally defend yourself from if you were among the top of the Academy's social hierarchy. Unfortunately, I couldn't deny being an underachiever; I was skipping courses, and I still hadn't gotten acquainted with all of my classmates. However, the female students were all cute, so I did want to become friendlier with them for now. Why exactly were all the no-name characters in eroge and anime so dang cute anyway?

The jealousy around Ludie wasn't only causing an uproar in our class but also had become a school-wide topic. As long as I didn't hold a certain level of authority on campus, it would likely be impossible to defend myself against it.

"C'mon now, you don't gotta worry about me. I'm gonna become the most powerful guy here, after all. Adversity isn't gonna stop me."

"That so...? You know, Kousuke, you're pretty strong, huh?"

"Damn right. The absolute strongest."

Iori chuckled a little, as if to say I was uttering nonsense. He seemed truly and earnestly concerned for me.

I had thought as much from playing the game, but the protagonist

was a seriously good dude. If he happened to be a girl and an eroge heroine, he would've been one of my many wives for sure, no matter what he looked like.

As I ate my parfait while mulling this over, I realized Iori was staring straight at me.

I scooped up some whipped cream with my spoon and brought it up to the right side of his cheek. With it, his eyes shifted to the right. Then, this time, I moved the spoon over to the left, and with it, Iori's eyes shifted left, too.

What the hell was he, a cute baby animal.....?!

—*Ludie's Perspective*—

I had a vague inkling that there were bad rumors going around about Kousuke. The people around had to be making sure I didn't overhear them. Since there were others kind enough to inform me about the situation, however, their consideration was in vain. Were they truly looking out for me, though? From my standpoint, it seemed like little more than behind-the-scenes maneuvering to avoid offending me.

I did believe Kousuke was partly to blame, though. With his already poor academics, there was probably nothing more annoying for the other students, who took their studies seriously, than watching him roaming aimlessly, skipping class, and not showing up for most of the afternoon lectures.

While I could understand his excuse for doing so, it proved to be the main factor behind why this problem would be difficult to resolve.

"I can't really come up with any reason for me to attend any of the afternoon courses. There's a whole lot of melee-focused people who head off to dojos or go off-campus or meet up with clubs instead of attending them, right? I'm simply using that time to head into the dungeon and stuff. Though I do end up at the café sometimes. And I try to make sure all the periods I'm skipping are my best subjects. What's the problem if I'm using that time to focus hard on my own training instead?"

He was right. There were many more students than I expected who skipped out on afternoon classes almost entirely. That, and he was mainly ignoring subjects he was strong in, like math and physical education.

No, no, no, that wasn't the point here. Right now, we were talking about his bad reputation.

"Problem is, he's standing out in a bad way," Kousuke's friend, Iori Hijiri, offered. "I don't mean to blame you, Princess, but I think the Lovely, Lovely Ludivine fan club lies at the root of the problem."

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing."

Rina Katou agreed with Hijiri's assessment.

"Basically, it's all just jealousy! Nothing but jealousy! When you're envious of somebody, right, you start finding fault with everything they do. A lot of those sorta types, really. But does showing contempt for someone make you feel like you've won out over them? Of course not, right? They should spend that time improving themselves until they're worthy of the attention they're looking for!"

Her statement contained an unusual degree of personal feelings.

"Kousuke doesn't seem to particularly care, either. If anything, it seems like the classmates he's close with are the ones getting angry and shocked at the rumors."

Yes, almost like—

"Like we are right now, huh?"

Did he really not care that he was causing others to worry about him? Though, in his case, it was possible he didn't even realize we were fretting. There were times when he could be terribly clever as well as terribly dense.

"If they were aware of even a fraction of the training he was doing, other students would definitely stop disapproving of him."

Rina scowled at my reply.

"I don't really know him very well, but just how much effort is he putting in anyway?"

"We have an acquaintance in the Morals Committee, and according to her, it's 'abnormal.' Extraordinary, freakish levels of hard work. She spoke highly of him; apparently, he focuses on fundamentals and drills that most people despise to an insane degree, doing them over and over without a single complaint, until he gets results he's proud of."

"High praise, but it sounds like she's a bit disturbed by it, too..."

"Per Kousuke himself, 'It's a million times better compared with speedrunning through a buggy, god-awful mess,' apparently."

Since I was clueless about those terms, I didn't really understand what he meant. It appeared that Hijiri and Rina didn't get what he'd said, either.

"Well, if classmates like us don't know, then there's no way people with even less contact with him would understand, either."

"Pretty much. I'm only aware of what he's normally like, so..."

Hijiri agreed with Rina's comment. Why did Kousuke act like this at school anyway when he was so absorbed in studying and training back at the Hanamuras'?

"Back at home, he's so much more—"

"At home?"

"At home?"

I lightly cleared my throat.

"He's probably just as laid-back there, don't you think?"

I'd totally forgotten that the fact that we were living together was a secret, save for a few people we'd told.

"?"

Hijiri looked confused, while Rina, on the other hand, frowned slightly. Even though I'd been warned of Katorina's sharp intuition, I just had to go and make a blunder like this.

"I wonder how Kousuke himself feels about these rumors."

I changed the topic in an attempt to divert the flow of the conversation. Hijiri jumped right on this.

"Oh, well, he didn't seem to care much at all. We were at lunch, and even after I told him, he kept digging into his delicious-looking parfait without a moment's pause. After that, he treated me to one 'as an apology for making me worry,' and it was really tasty! It had these huge strawberries; they were so sweet!"

Was it just me, or was he focusing more on the dessert than Kousuke?

A thought crossed my mind as I saw his eyes sparkle. Maybe instead of 'as an apology for making him worry,' Kousuke bought him the parfait because he couldn't endure Hijiri's drooling stare any longer.

...That couldn't possibly be it, right?

"Nah, there's nothing to worry about."

That statement came from the Morals Committee vice president and the person Kousuke respected as his master, Yukine Mizumori.

"Kousuke isn't an idiot. He must have figured this would happen. That's why he still holes himself up in the dungeon and doesn't let it weigh on him, right?"

I nodded.

"I already felt outdone by him, but I really have to doff my hat again. This is just me speaking personally, but as humans, it's very easy to be influenced by the looks and words of others."

I shared her sentiment.

"That being said, it's hard to call what he's doing praiseworthy, exactly. For starters, I'm still the vice president of the Morals Committee, so I should be warning him about his behavior as well."

"However," Yukine continued, her voice growing in intensity, "from the perspective of getting stronger, his actions are very reasonable. He deserves praise for not bending to the opinions of others and training himself effectively. Besides, Takioto isn't directly causing any trouble for anyone else, right?"

I nodded. It was exactly as she'd said. He wasn't causing any delays or disturbances in class simply by skipping sometimes.

"Perhaps I should caution LLL directly myself?"

At my words, Yukine shook her head.

“No, for LLL, it’s best to leave them be until they do something really bad. Verified and confirmed facts by both Monica, Majorly Monica and Stefania, Super Stefania. When you ask some fans to tone it down, they only grow more jealous and act even more extreme. Though Captain Stef used this to make them go out of control on purpose and managed to crush them as a lesson.”

Well, that sounded... Those two had a hard time on their hands, too, didn’t they?

“I get that it’s exasperating. Well, I think it’s fine to sympathize with President Monica, but for Captain Stef...actually, forget I said anything. Just a slip of the tongue.”

There were many fantastical rumors about Lady Stefania, to the point where I only ever heard good things about her. However, something about this always felt a little bit off to me. There were times when her usual smiling face looked like she was wearing a mask.

“Let’s wrap this up for now. Takioto understands the current situation, right?”

“His friends have confirmed as much.”

“Hmm, well, it’s Takioto. If he’s acting like usual and not panicking about it, then he’ll figure it out. More importantly, we need to buckle down and train harder so he doesn’t leave us behind.”

“Ever since he started going into the dungeon, his abilities have been growing at an abnormal rate... He could pass me by at any moment.”

No, I was already being left in the dust. He was showing true results during his bouts with Claris. There were times when she would go down on a knee while he would still be standing.

Claris had to be concerned about it, too. Ever since her win rate started dropping, she’d been spending more time honing her skills.

“I’m feeling the pressure, myself. I’ve never seen someone develop their abilities so much in such a short period of time,” Yukine remarked, looking pleased. She then seemed to recall something and quickly changed the subject.

“...You’re living together with Takioto at the principal’s house, right? I’m really jealous.”

“Jealous?”

“Yeah, I’m sure I would have more drive to focus on my training with him around. I could ask Marino or Hatsumi any magic-related questions, too. I don’t know if there’s any better environment out there to buff yourself up.”

I couldn’t suppress my sigh. I remembered that the girl in front of me was every bit the single-minded meathead that Kousuke was.

“Going back a bit, if you can’t bear to see the gap widen, why don’t

you bring it up with him straight, sooner rather than later? Tell him to teach you how he got so strong. I think he'd actually be pretty honest about it. If anything, I'd like to ask him myself. Want me to do it for you?"

At this, I imagined Yukine amiably conversing with Kousuke, and—

"That's okay, I'll bring it up to him myself."

—gave my reply.

Yukine nodded before continuing, "...There's a chance down the line that Takioto will face even more jealousy and envy than he's dealing with now."

She began to explain further.

"Depending on the situation, it could get waaaaay worse. Still just a possibility. If Takioto can avoid catching more heat, he should be fine."

But—

"Kousuke doesn't seem like he'll worry about his reputation if it means reaching his goals."

That was how I felt, and his actual behavior showed as much, too.

"That's right. And that's not all."

It wasn't?

"If it's for someone he cares about, he doesn't care much about his own life, either. You know that better than anyone else, yeah?"

A gasp of surprise escaped my lips.

"The more time I spend with him, the fonder I grow of him. That's why I can say this—"

Yukine stood up tall in front of me, and I even felt a tinge of hostility in her serious expression.

"No matter how intensely the students of the Academy loathe him, that won't stop me from being on his side."

She gazed straight at me after she spoke but then suddenly broke into a bright, enthusiastic smile.

"I can't think of him as a bad guy," she added.

Though the words slipped down gently into my heart, my chest tightened. Not much time had passed since Kousuke and Yukine had met, but this must have been the reason he'd placed all his trust in her.

"And what about you, Princess Ludivine Marie-Ange de la Tréfle?"

Her question prompted me to think of Kousuke.

He hadn't recoiled when he'd discovered my true personality; instead, he'd insisted it made it easier for us to get along and comfortably struck up conversations with me. Outside of my family and Claris, was there anyone else I could be my true self around?

The next thing that came to mind was the incident at the Hanamura Hotel.

When our backs were against the wall after being betrayed by a man who had served the Tréfle family for over a decade, he shielded us from harm, completely unafraid of death.

“Kousuke...”

That wasn’t it, either.

It was the same when I was thrown into that dungeon.

Particularly with that ogre.

I’d given in when I realized we couldn’t escape it. But Kousuke was different. He stood in front of me and dueled against it, just barely evading its strikes, which could have killed him in a single hit. All to protect me.

Now that I thought about it, whenever I’d been in trouble, he was always there to save me.

Then what about me?

If he was driven into a corner, what would I do?

If he was worried about something, what would I do? Hmph, as if there were any other answer.

“I want to continue supporting Kousuke, too.”

If he ever found himself in peril, then I wanted to save him for once. I wanted to remain by his side.

When I looked at Yukine, staring at me so gently after my declaration that it was as though she were the holy mother herself, I felt a bit embarrassed and turned my head aside.

“B-besides, it’d be lonely to lose a ramen buddy, right?”

She chuckled heartily.

“Right. Then it’ll be fine. If something happens, we’ll be there to support him. Though he doesn’t seem to need any help at the moment anyway. This time, at least, Takioto will settle things even without our help. Can’t imagine how he’ll manage to do it, though.”

There were many people who thought highly of him. Marino, Hatsumi, myself, and Claris, too. However, I felt like no one held him in higher esteem than Yukine.

“All right, time to get back to training. Wanna join me, Ludie?” Yukine said, seemingly invigorated and spiritedly stretching out her body.

My whole face stretched into a smile. I then shook my head.

Absolutely not.

Yukine and Kousuke’s training required stepping into a realm of pure masochistic punishment—there was no way I was doing that. Anyone who says they’re going for a “light jog” and ends up doing a full marathon has a few screws loose.

When I saw her disappointment, a slight sense of guilt rose up inside me. Still, that didn’t make the impossible any more possible.

“Deeeelicious,” Marino announced, removing the Kousuke-brewed cup of coffee from her mouth. Following the chaos of the demon’s appearance, we’d finally gotten the chance to have dinner together with her and Hatsumi for the first time in a while. But after brewing up tea and coffee, Kousuke immediately left for his post-dinner practice swings.

“Very good,” Hatsumi agreed, taking a sip of the coffee Kousuke had made for her.

“Hrgh.”

Claris drank her tea in obvious discontent. His skill wasn’t limited to coffee; it extended to tea as well. When asked why he was as good as he was at brewing it, he would reply, “I always thought about leaving the corporate life to open up a café...,” dodging the question with such a desperate quip that I didn’t even know where to begin. Assuming the part of about leaving the corporate life was a joke, what was the actual reason? Had his deceased parents enjoyed those beverages? I could see why *that* would be hard to bring up.

Kousuke disliked bringing down the mood by talking about himself, so perhaps he was deflecting out of consideration.

“I’ll warn him about his absences if they get too plentiful to ignore, but he seems to be calculating how many days he needs to be present, and he’s making sure to attend courses for his worst subjects...”

Marino was spot-on—Kousuke was taking extra-special care to attend lectures for areas he struggled with. An actual misbehaving student would make sure to skip those classes instead.

“His rate of growth is too much to ignore, if anything,” Hatsumi noted dispassionately. Claris let out a dry chuckle, but since she was sparring with him so often, she probably understood his progress more than anyone else.

“It’s so unusual. Makes you wonder if he’s taking an illicit drug or something.”

“Whatever it is, I want what he’s having.”

I was sure Hatsumi understood this herself, but that sort of substance didn’t actually exist.

“In that case, is it possible he’s doing something while he is absent from his classes?”

Marino nodded at Claris’s question.

“You’re right, he certainly is. All of his activities have been left behind in the Academy’s records. But those records, well...they’re bizarre.”

“Ummm...bizarre?” I inquired before Marino continued.

“Yes, they’re strange. Kousuke keeps challenging the Beginner’s Dungeon over and over again, and...well, that’s to be expected. The Tsukuyomi Dungeon isn’t unlocked for first-years at the Academy.”

Apparently, the Tsukuyomi Dungeon posed a huge difficulty spike. Compared with the Beginner's Dungeon, its level of challenge was off the charts. As such, the only ones allowed to take it on were students who'd gleaned a certain degree of exploratory knowledge and had cleared the Beginner's Dungeon. We were scheduled to finish the required dungeon education by the beginning of next month, but unfortunately, it seemed the timing overlapped with our periodic exams, so we wouldn't be able to enter until after they ended.

Marino prefaced her next statement with, "This is all personal information, so strict confidentiality, okay?" and continued:

"Kousuke is descending into the labyrinth several times a day. Several. Wouldn't one trip a day be plenty? But instead, he's completing a run every two hours, only stopping for his lunch break. That alone would be unusual enough, but what's strangest of all is that he properly finishes his expedition each time he goes in."

Marino let out a big sigh. At this, Claris questioned her with a look of surprise.

"Clears it? Multiple times a day? Forgive me, but I remember hearing you say that there are *ten layers* in the dungeon, yes?"

Though she'd never challenged the labyrinth herself, Claris voiced her doubts.

"Yes, that's right. *Ten layers*. While we haven't gotten an exact number, he's certainly set the Academy record for the fastest completion time."

"What exactly is Kousuke doing in the Beginner's Dungeon, then?"

Claris's question was shared by all the people present.

"Figuring that out might explain how he's developed so much, too. Running daily, practice swings, constantly enchanting his Third and Fourth Hands—even all of that doesn't totally explain his rate of development. Though I do get that one of these things stands out already...," Marino answered with a stilted smile.

Even for the Witch of Tsukuyomi, constant enchantment was impossible. The only person capable of doing it was Kousuke, with his unparalleled mana pool.

Honestly, what was the deal with this family anyway?

While the Hanamura bloodline had produced a succession of magic-users who'd left their mark on history, its current generation may have been the most flush with magic-users yet. There was Marino; her daughter, Hatsumi, the authority on space-time magic; and Kousuke.

There had been a moment in time when people chided them for abandoning magic for the corporate world, but you wouldn't catch anyone saying that now.

"Kousuke's biggest strength...is probably his vaguely contemplative thought process."

Hatsumi had a point. Kousuke just had this composure about him, like he'd lived way longer than he looked. Sure, he joined in with the other students' moronic nonsense at the Academy, but deep down, he was levelheaded, reliable, and could cleanly switch between modes when the situation called for it.

He also had a sort of core to him not present in other students. The unexpected flashes of melancholy in his expression and the mysterious heft in his words gave you the impression that he was hiding his true age.

Considering the environment he'd grown up in, though, it might have only been a matter of course for him to turn out this way.

"He seems to be living a bit fast and loose to me, really," Marino quietly muttered to herself. Her comment wrapped the room in silence. Hearing that from her certainly made it seem that way. Training so hard he could collapse from exhaustion at any moment was far from normal.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up."

Marino looked square at me while she spoke. In other words, she wanted to protect me.

I didn't want her to, though. I wanted to watch, understand, and support him.

"I feel a bit envious of our little Kou...," Marino muttered, looking around at us all.

"I'll try asking him what he keeps going into the dungeon for. It's Kousuke, after all. Despite what we may think, he could just be clearing it because he enjoys seeing himself improve."

Marino nodded with a strained smile when I suggested this.

"Anything's possible with him, right?"

I was on the same page there.

She loudly clapped her hands together.

"At the end of the day, Kousuke's training hard to better himself. In that case, we should reward him for his diligence. It seems there's some resentment toward him brewing on campus," she said with a wink.

Hatsumi was the first person to nod in agreement. But if we were going to reward him, the person who'd caused all this trouble with LLL would have to act first—that was me. In my defense, though, that wasn't necessarily my fault.

"What do you think we should do for him?" I asked.

"Hmm, let's see. We do something like compliment him, massage him, gift him something he likes, sleep in bed with him, pat his head, sleep in bed with him, clean his ears, sleep in bed with him, or sleep in bed with him. How do those sound?"

Why exactly was she pushing so hard for snoozing together?

Perhaps she was telling a joke to lighten up the heavy mood that had descended over the room. But c'mon, this was Kousuke the horndog we were talking about. As a strained smile twitched on my face—

“Those definitely sound like things he would enjoy.”

—I gave my reply. Realistically, a massage was a strong option. It could be good to give him one tonight, considering he had his hands full with after-dinner exercises and katana practice.

First, I need to ask Claris for pointers on technique, I thought to myself as I sipped the milk tea he'd prepared for me.

Incidentally, when Hatsumi left the room, Marino had said something like “The future of the Hanamura family is in good hands.” I hadn't the foggiest what she meant by that.

Finished showering off my sweat-soaked body, I returned to my room and took a cold coffee milk out from the refrigerator. After reflecting on how convenient it could be to have a fridge in my own room, I sat down in the expensive-looking chair I'd been given and reached out to grab the book lying on my desk.

Then, just as I cracked it open, it happened. There was a rap at my door.

Its sound told me exactly who was knocking.

Ludie and Claris would call out for me with their knock. Marino would barge in immediately after knocking. What was I supposed to do if I was doing something naughty? It was a bit of a tantalizing thought.

After placing a bookmark in between the pages of the open text on magic arts, I called out to her.

“What's up, Sis?”

After I said this, the door opened with a *clank* as she stepped inside. Sis didn't say a word as she sat down on the bed and patted the spot next to her, calling me to sit beside her.

I wasn't sure what she was after, but I moved to where she'd indicated. When I did, I couldn't believe what happened next.

“Um, Sis. What exactly are you doing?”

She placed her hand on my head and tapped it lightly.

“This?”

From there, she pressed her palm down and began to stroke me.

“Um. Is something wrong?”

Well, see, it was just—having her pat me on the head right after showing up in my room out of the blue was obviously bewildering. With her scent wafting up my nose at point-blank range and our bodies coming together, there was no way I would be anything *but* bewildered.

“You’re working hard, Kousuke.”

Was Sis trying to compliment me in her own way or make me feel better? Either way, I hadn’t the slightest recollection of doing anything worthy of praise or encouragement.

“Does that cheer you up?”

“Y-yeah.”

More than anything, I was frantically trying to keep that rising “cheer” down. Naturally, I was a gentleman, so I was striving as best I could to keep the fact from showing on my face. The problem was, though, that when you were stuck this close together, well, there was no way of stopping all that “cheer” from gathering in a very particular place.

I was in deep shit.

“Hmm...”

The sound slipped from Sis’s lips as she gazed at me. Perhaps she’d caught on to my confusion. Either that, or she’d realized what was going on down *there*. Anything but that.

It might have been because I was looking down—

“Maybe you’d like me to rub your thigh?”

She offered this completely out of the blue.

Was I in a hostess bar? Had I wandered into one while I was reading? Given that it was possible to head to alternate universes or the world of *eroge*, it wouldn’t be that strange of an explanation.

Then, taking my stunned silence as affirmation, she began touching my thighs.

“How is it?”

“S-Sis, just hold on a sec.”

At this, her hands stopped. I rapidly started talking.

“W-well, uh, that really cheered me up. Let’s just leave it at that! So, uh, thanks, Sis!” I insisted as I took her palm off my thigh and went to return it to her lap.

“Really...?”

However, Sis held on fast to my hand and stood up.

“Okay...!” she said, and then using her other hand, she peeled back the quilt on my bed.

It wasn’t an exaggeration to say my befuddlement had reached its absolute peak.

First of all, what exactly was that “okay” about? There were a variety of different *okays*. Did she mean “okay” as in giving me permission to get in bed, or like telling a pet “okay” after making them stay still in front of their food bowl? Or maybe *okay* in “Okay, let’s do this!” or *Okey*, which refers to the Turkish tile game?

Okay now, I just needed to calm down a second here. I should just get straight to the point and figure out what her intentions were.

“So, Sis, what exactly is this supposed to be?!”

“It’s best to rest when you’re feeling tired.”

So her “okay” *had* meant “Go ahead and get in bed,” then. On second thought, that was probably the only real answer.

Nevertheless, she was indeed speaking the truth. Sleeping was both mentally and physically restorative.

Still, why was she mentioning this sort of thing with my hand tightly wrapped in hers?

“G-good point. I’ll just get changed and get to sleep, then...”

I pointed my gaze toward the door, gesturing for her to leave and let me get dressed.

“Got it,” she replied—but no, she didn’t get it whatsoever. She showed no signs of leaving my room, and she hadn’t moved a single inch.

“Um, Sis? Being w-watched while I get changed is kinda embarrassing, so...”

My response caused her to flush a bit, so she averted her eyes.

“It’s awkward for me, too...”

Then, hooooow about you get out?! She had absolutely no plans on leaving, did she?!

“It’s okay, I won’t look,” she promised, taking her hands off me and covering her face with them. Still, I caught a glimpse of some open gaps in between her fingers.

Now that I thought about it, Marino had done something similar during that close-shave moment with Sis and me, hadn’t she?! Like mother, like daughter, then?! Oh well, that didn’t matter right now.

“S-sure.”

I wasn’t really certain what I was so sure about, but I decided to get changed for the time being. I needed to get my mind off those eyes peeking out from those gaps in her fingers. Perhaps by some extraordinary phenomenon, she would close them once I started to undress.

First, I took my pajamas out from the closet. Then I sneaked a peek at Sis, where I found enough of an opening between her fingers for a wintertime draft to drop the temperatures behind them below freezing.

To the hell with this; I give up.

I glanced at her while I ventured to take off my clothes. Um...the open gaps in her hands were getting bigger. She was staring straight at me.

“Uh, Sis.”

“I’ve never seen green underwear before.”

She was gawking right at me!

I finished changing and slipped under the covers she’d peeled back

for me. Right when I thought the humiliation play was finally over, it happened. Sis began to undress.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

She wore her usual vacant expression, but with slightly reddening cheeks—

“Bed-sharing,” she muttered, removing her top and casually placing it nearby.

Did that always require you to strip, or...? While my thoughts swirled in disarray, Sis took off more and more, until she was left in nothing but a negligee she had produced out of nowhere. They were huge.

Sis pulled back the covers, got in next to me, and pressed her body up close for some reason.

My head felt like it would boil.

So, um, what exactly was all this, then? Why in the world was I sharing a bed with Sis? Was she being possessed by the devil or something?

“Kousuke.”

“?”

“Turn this way.”

When I squirmed my body over to face the other side, she hugged me tight.

Now I get it. This is Eden.

Absolutely wonderful. The gigantic peaks, like all of my life’s happiness completely condensed together, wrapped themselves around my head. I was filled with tremendous bliss, as though narcotics had been injected directly into my brain. War, religion, eroge, who cares?! This was paradise!

.....Okay, just hold on a second. I needed to calm down and come back to reality.

How exactly did we get here?

At first, all she did was give me a *pat, pat* on the head. Then she gave my thighs a *fwish, fwish*. Next thing I knew, everything before my eyes was *jiggle-jiggle, boing-boing*. This wasn’t helping...my thoughts were devolving into a slush of onomatopoeia.

When I mulled it over some more, however, I couldn’t see this as anything else but her attempt to seduce me.

But wait—it wasn’t like Sis and I were in a relationship. And if I gave in to my bestial urges and she angrily reported it to Marino, then what would my life look like from here on out?

I couldn’t let that happen.

I needed to think back to game speedrunning. You wanted your route to be stable and clear, not dangerous, right?

Okay, time to calm down. Once I did, I would be able to recall how

to clear Sis's route in *Magical ★Explorer*. That might give me a way to survive this.

Sis's route, let's see, her character is only there to give unique spells to the protagonist... Um, then she grants magic that helps expedite his path to becoming overpowered, then...hmm...

Sis isn't a heroine with a rouuuuuuuuuuuute!

What was I going to do? What was I supposed to do?

Dammit, my inner devil was whispering in my ear.

Devil: *"Whoa, whoa, c'mon now, look at how hard she's seducing you here. Forget all that crap about your place in the Hanamura family and go for it."*



This wasn't helping. I needed the angel inside me to stop this demon. *Please*, I pleaded, *you gotta stop him*.

Angel: *"Make sure to keep her comfort in mind. Be gentle with her."*

There was no angel. Simply unanimity.

Okay, "Better to starve free than be a fat slave" can shove it. Shameful is the man who refuses the meal laid out before him. My mind was set.

I put a bit more force into my hug. Then—

"S-Sis..."

My resolve firm, I called out to her. However, there was no reaction. I raised my head and came to a painful realization.

"...Zzzzz...Zzzzz..."

"S-seriously...? She's out cold...?"

What was I supposed to do without any outlet for all this excitement?

".....Time for bed," I mumbled before shutting my eyes. But what happened instead?

She was shifting around a lot. Then she strengthened her embrace and remained in that position as her breathing grew steady.

"You know..."

Whether her scent or the softness of her skin, it was impossible to not be painfully aware of every inch of her body as it moved rhythmically with her breathing.

".....I can't sleep."

I had really wanted to take on the dungeon in the morning, too.



CONFIG

The fact that I was going to become the mightiest in the world was a done deal, but there was still something important to keep in mind: I needed to do this as quickly as possible. That was because Iori and Katorina would eventually catch up to me.

Especially Iori. In *Magical ★Explorer*, once you develop your characters to a certain extent and meet various conditions—unlocking a number of different dungeons and amassing money, weapons, and gear—his growth is explosive.

If I duked it out with Iori right now, the kid wouldn't stand a chance. That wasn't an exaggeration but a simple matter of fact. My runs in the Beginner's Dungeon played a role in this, but going through the Palace of Worldly Impermanence to save Ludie was a much bigger factor.

However, I wasn't sure if I would still be able to beat Iori after he went through his first period of explosive character growth.

What I needed to do was keep pushing myself forward with everything I had and not get conceited about being more powerful than him right now.

Despite that, this wasn't the most pressing reason behind my need to quickly grow in strength. If I focused on my true goal, the protagonist's development wouldn't be a concern at all.

In *Magical ★Explorer*, there are limited-time events. I wanted to avoid the possibility that a delay in my growth could leave me forever unable to save someone.

In that case, what was the best way for me to develop? I had a few ideas, but the one point they all shared was that it would be best for me to stop going solo.

That's why I was currently visiting the Twilight Cavern, part of the limited edition's downloadable bonus content. My objective was the deepest part of the dungeon. Given the amount of experience I'd earned from the Palace of Worldly Impermanence, what was my best course of action if I felt the magic particles, battle experience, and item drops from the dungeon's random enemies were all worthless to me?

Ignoring them all, duh.

“I’ve got my water magic sigil stones, I’ve got my healing potions, and my stole’s been enchanted with water.”

I began checking all of my items and equipment before the tenth layer, where the boss awaited me. After confirming I had everything I needed, I put both of my stole’s hands into a fighting stance and charged into the chamber. It looked like the same gloomy cavern as elsewhere, but this was the biggest room in the whole labyrinth. There, standing in the center of the room, was a single monster.

Based on appearance alone, anyone would have mistaken it for a black cat. From its ears to its eyes to its tail, it resembled a kitty in every possible way.

But this wasn’t the type of little, tiny kitten that invited you to laze around and meow together.

First off, it was huge. It was close to ten times larger than average, more tiger than house cat. Also, its voice was very deep. While it meowed just like a regular kitty, its weirdly low-pitched voice sounded terrifying.

The creature was purring, but it slowly stood up and closed in on my position. Then it summoned two flaming wheels on either side of its body.

“Mrrrrreooooow!”

As it cried out, each of the fiery wheels came flying toward me.

I reflected one of them with my Third Hand and dodged the other. The shots kept going until they crashed against the wall and disappeared.

At the sight of this, the cat let out an irate meow and summoned two more wheels.

The boss of Twilight Cavern, Fire Chariot, was a fiend that cloaked itself in the skin of the cat. A post on the developers’ blog confirmed it was based on a supernatural Japanese yokai spirit, the *kasha*.

As I again deflected the flaming ammunition flying toward me, I gradually advanced. Thanks to my water enchantment, I was easily able to deflect and parry the attacks as they homed in.

When I closed the distance between myself and the Fire Chariot, I punched with my Fourth Hand at the boss’s head. Yet it easily dodged the attack by rushing forward. Actually, it wasn’t a simple juke. It kept pressing onward, flying toward me with its jaw spread open wide and ready to snap, proudly showing off its fangs.

As the Fire Chariot fervently bounded toward me, I took my empty Third Hand and slammed it into its body as hard as I could.

“Mrwaaarh!”

“H-hoo boy, that was scary.”

I knew for certain the Fire Chariot’s movements were slower than

Yukine's since my counterattack had been fast enough to connect as it rammed toward me. But the other monsters in the dungeon had all been terribly sluggish... It made the boss seem much quicker.

The difference between the monsters I had faced before and the Fire Chariot was that it would firmly remain conscious even after I sent it flying into the wall with a counterattack. Up until now, they would all either die immediately or teeter on the edge of unconsciousness. As I watched the boss regain its balance in midair, I charged my katana's sheath with magic and prepared to draw my blade.

Successfully landing upright, the Fire Chariot immediately kicked off the ground and pounced straight for me. It wasn't relying on its fangs this time. Its long claws, too large to be believably contained within its body and closer to a ninja's weapon than anything else, stretched from its oversized and grotesque paws as it closed in. I activated my Mind's Eye skill, then deflected the looming nails with my Third Hand. At this, the Fire Chariot jumped sideways momentarily before pouncing at me with an outstretched left paw. Fully guarding the attack with my Fourth Hand, I then released the mana charged in my sheath and drew my katana.

That was the moment I knew I would win.

I had experienced instances like this for as long as I could remember. Even though the final outcome was still uncertain, I knew how things would shake out for some reason. It would happen particularly often when I took shots in games like basketball and soccer. Mere moments after the ball had left my hands or feet, I understood what trajectory it would take, and I knew it would fly in that exact arc into the net. I saw this in eroge, too, but also with bows, apparently. The moment I let a nocked arrow fly, I would already realize, *Oh, this is going to be a bull's-eye*. These observations probably all stemmed from the same place.

After repeating the same actions over and over and over again, your muscles internalized the feeling.

I was nothing but grateful for Yukine's comment. Previously, when she had said, "Sorry, Takioto, but you don't have any fundamental talent for the katana," it had been a bit of a shock. The rapture I'd felt after she immediately followed up by saying, "But you do have a different gift" was still fresh in my memory.

From then on, day in and day out, I focused entirely on gaining command of just two of the katana forms. After many, many days of practice, finally, they came together into a singular shape.

Sword-Drawing Arts—Flash—

Returning my blade to its sheath, I reduced the mana being sent

through my stole to the absolute minimum.

“Mreooow!”

Together with its muffled yelp, the Fire Chariot’s body split into two. From there, it immediately transformed into magic particles and the largest magic stone I’d seen thus far.

I believed that this boss was the strongest of all the monsters I had clashed with yet. Its speed and offensive power were both clearly superior to anything else I’d seen, and it wielded fire magic on top of that.

Nevertheless. Adequately enchanting my stole with water had allowed me to address its fire magic. There was a world of difference between its speed and the force of each of its strikes compared with my normal sparring partners.

Moreover, its tactics were no different from a normal monster; nothing about its fighting strategy surprised me.

“I guess the outcome was obvious. That’s all there is to it. Huh.”

I stared hard at the magic stone in my hand.

If the Fire Chariot respawned over and over again, killing it repeatedly would have been an effective way to make money, but unfortunately, it doesn’t return to life. You can’t even return to this dungeon once you clear it.

Putting the magic stone away, I continued deeper into the labyrinth, where the individual I was aiming for was supposed to be.

Awaiting me farther in the chamber was a door large enough for a single person to comfortably pass through. I touched a square section on it with my hand. Then a blue light rushed from my hand to the four corners of the door before it slid to the side with a *pssst*.

My first impression upon stepping inside was that this was clearly—

“An entryway, huh?”

A place to take off my shoes, a shoe rack, and a hallway extending farther inward. Even from here, I could see there were several other doors; I wondered which she was waiting behind.

Taking off my shoes in the cozy sunken foyer, I placed my foot on the wooden floor.

“You’ve got to be kidding...”

After taking a step, I saw a distinct footprint left behind. The place was so unused that a layer of dust was caked all across the ground. I debated over it for a moment before deciding to enter the hallway with my shoes still on.

“This is quite the room, too...”

I decided to open the first entrance I saw. Greeting me on the other side was a chamber chock-full of the signs of daily life.

Though caked in a layer of dust, the place was fully adorned with wallpaper and contained both a bed and a lamp lit via a magic stone. I

picked up one of the books placed next to the bed. I couldn't tell what was written inside. Haphazardly shoving it inside my subspace storage bag, I looked over the area. Then, upon spotting a trash bin next to the mattress, I peeked under the bed on the off chance my instincts were right.

It was like a wish come true. This hiding place had gone the way of the dinosaur even in the world of eroge and dating sims. These days, most people put them somewhere else precisely because it was such an obvious area to stash things. Especially if you had a younger sister.

Tenderly handling it like it was a historical cultural artifact, I lightly blew the dust off it. A black-haired girl, dressed in a liberating outfit, with a lascivious expression on her face. There was no doubt about it.

This was a porn mag.

Desperately bringing my pounding heart under control, I deliberately flipped through the pages, one at a time.

"Hmm...oh my. This is juicy stuff."

I dabbed my eyes and tried to preserve mental clarity. The fact that she resembled Ludie a little made it all the more stimulating.

Reciting a Heart Sutra-like chant in my mind to calm myself, I politely put the periodical into my storage bag. Then, after some deep breaths, I went back into the hallway and headed to the room next door.

Inside was a television-looking device, translucent pillars, and a myriad of other things I had never seen either in this world nor during my entire life back in Japan.

Randomly grabbing anything that looked like I could carry it with me, I then stretched my hand out to the next entrance.

"No way. This is incredible..."

On the other side of the door was yet another different world.

"From a cavern to a house...and now a meadow?"

There was a proverb I'd found when researching the labyrinths of this world: "To consider the nature of dungeons is like questioning the nature of death." When I first read this, I didn't really think anything of it, but witnessing these sorts of extreme supernatural worlds that completely flew in the face of any and all common sense, I was convinced that proverb had it right.

Above the wide-open meadow, the sun was beginning to rise in the expansive sky. The moderately dry air caressed my skin, bringing with it the smell of flowers and soil.

When I casually glanced behind me, I was even more surprised.

"Seriously?!"

Behind me stood the door I had come through. And indeed, though it still stood there, the entrance was entirely on its own, the only man-made object amid the vast grassland. There was truly nothing else

aside from it. Not only that, but on the other side of the doorway, I could see the familiar dust-covered hallway. I tried passing my hand in and out of it, and ultimately, the only conclusion I could arrive at was that this was some unexplainable phenomenon. Concluding my entrance investigation, I took another look around the area.

Several clouds floated in the light-blue sky overhead. The rising sun cast beams of light through the gaps in the clouds and illuminated the earth below.

“Man, that’s pretty... Makes you realize why they call those rays a Jacob’s ladder or a gleaming pipe organ, huh...? Hmm?”

Looking at where the sunbeams cast their glow, I instantly paused for a moment.

“Is that area the only place that’s not grassland? Something’s over there, too.”

At the light’s destination, there was stone pavement with a mysterious magic circle etched into it, along with an oval-shaped object. I didn’t know what exactly it was supposed to be. When I first glanced at it, I thought it was a giant egg of some kind. But those didn’t float in midair.

This egg-shaped object was about as tall as I was. When I got a closer look, I saw there was something hairlike growing out of it. Noticing some feather plumes beneath the egg, I realized it wasn’t fur, but feathers.

“It looks a bit different than how it is in *Magical ★Explorer*, but... this has to be it, right?”

I gently touched the object bathed in light from the sunbeams and tried pressing my hand inward. It felt furry and fluffy, like I was touching a rabbit, but it also had a resilience that pushed back hard against my hand.

Imitating what the protagonist does in the game, I began filling the egg with my mana. My magic only trickled in at first due to my initial hesitancy, but around midway through the process, it began pouring into the egg like a river. Still, it showed no signs of changing.

“How much is this supposed to suck up, again? This is the first time I’ve expended so much energy lately...”

No doubt thanks to my daily training, my recent mana growth was remarkable. Ever since I’d gotten the hang of maintaining enchantments all day every day, I’d made sure to keep it up whenever I wasn’t sleeping. Additionally, I was still expending a lot of mana during my sparring matches with Claris and the others. However, it had been a while since I had released this much. Despite this, the egg-like object still continued sucking it all up.

Right around the time when I started to worry, cursing myself for not bringing any MP recovery items, a change occurred.

“×□▲○—mana registration complete—|*”#\$\$%&’(”

“Whoa.”

When this voice suddenly echoed in my head, I instinctively removed my hand from the object and observed it cautiously. However, there was no further change, and at some point, a transparent display appeared from the glowing magic circle at my feet. I stared at it in confusion.

“I can’t read any of this...,” I muttered, and upon doing so, the words on the display disappeared. I looked on in curiosity as the language on the screen changed to Japanese.

SELECT A FORM.

- SPRING FORM
- SUMMER FORM
- AUTUMN FORM
- WINTER FORM
- HEAVEN FORM

I couldn’t help but cock my head in confusion at this list. If my memory served me correctly, there are supposed to be four options here. They’re also supposed to be displayed in English as TYPE-1, TYPE-2, TYPE-3, and TYPE-4. Simply comparing the game version with this display, I could guess that spring, summer, autumn, and winter equated with the 1, 2, 3, and 4 types respectively. However.

“What’s this ‘heaven form’ business...? There’s clearly one option too many here.”

When using a physical-build protagonist, I had selected what seemed to be the winter form equivalent, type-4.

“Normally, winter form would be the choice here... My gut’s telling me to pick the heaven one instead, though.”

Whenever I saw something new, I always wanted to try it, even against my better judgment. I was always a sucker for the words *Brand-New Flavor* when it came to snacks and stuff, even though the products themselves were usually a mixed bag.

I pressed my finger to the field that read HEAVEN FORM. Then, when asked ARE YOU SURE? I selected YES.

What happened when I did? The feathers began to gently drop from the egg to the ground below. As soon as they reached the earth, the feathers began to glow, turning into small particles before disappearing entirely.

Light flooded out of the places from which they had dropped, illuminating the area much like a laser show at a concert or stadium event.

Before long, the pace of the falling feathers quickened, and the

radiance continued growing stronger with it. Now unable to gaze directly at the blinding glow, I brought my Third Hand up in front of my face to shield my vision. There, I patiently waited for the light to die down.

The blinding luminescence that kept me from opening my eyes lasted less than a minute. Figuring it had died down from behind my Third Hand, I gazed at the egg. But it was no longer there. In its place was a floating woman dressed in a maid outfit.

“Visibility good. AA terminal possession confirmed. Acquiring time.”

Tossing her glossy silver bangs that hung down over her eyes, she took an instrument out from her pocket and began typing something into it. When she did, a transparent display appeared in front of her, and some sort of writing started to flow across the screen.

“Connecting to A&A Co.... Process failed. Acquiring from local network... Process failed. Dungeon network completely disappeared, time settings via AA terminal impossible. Functionality limited.”

As she put the instrument away, the screen floating in front of her vanished with it.

She shifted her purple eyes my way.

“Greetings, Contractor. I am Maid-Knight Servant, 73rd Edition, manufactured by A&A Co.”

In *Magical ★Explorer*, Maid-Knight Servant, 73rd Edition is an extremely easy-to-use party member who only appears in the limited edition.

Since her name is set to an identification moniker of MKS73, the player is able to change it when she joins their party. Still, most of the illustrious player base went off the Japanese readings for the numbers seven and three of her model number and dubbed her Nanami.

Another one of her features is that the player can alter her personality and hair color depending on which form they choose. Type-1 has pink hair, based off the cherry blossoms of spring; type-2 has light-green hair, projecting a verdant summer landscape; type-3 has crimson-red hair to match autumnal foliage; and finally, type-4 has indigo hair to suggest the chilly winter sky.

Now then, what about the form in front of me?

Her hair was a lustrous silver. She had mismatched eyes, one magenta and one blue-violet, that left a slightly cold and unfriendly impression. Her breasts weren't quite as big as Sis's, but based on how the maid clothes emphasized their presence, they were still quite hefty.

“Would you please provide me with your name?” she requested dispassionately, completely unperturbed by my probing stare, as

though she were a machine.

“Kousuke...Takioto.”

“Kousuke Takioto, you have been registered... Kousuke Takioto, thank you for contracting with the Maid-Knight Series. My deepest apologies, but due to my isolation from the Dungeon Network, I would like to verify the current situation if at all possible...”

Or so she said, but I didn’t understand. As for *what* I specifically didn’t understand, that would be everything. For starters...

“Um, what exactly is the ‘Dungeon Network’?”

There isn’t a conversation like this in *Magical ★Explorer*. She greets you with the wild “*Your destined partner has appeared before you*” before moving in together with the protagonist in his cramped room to devotedly care for him. Not only that, she’s pushy like no other, swearing ultimate loyalty to him right from the get-go.

When the protagonist wonders to himself why she’s so grateful to him, she explains that “*There was the chance I would have been left behind in the dungeon forever without ever once being activated.*” Later, however, she ends up disclosing that “*Everything I said back then was really just a front... I was mandated to act like I was pledging my loyalty to the person who registered their mana with me.*” In her following line, she states, “*But now things are different, because I have you...*,” which makes many players fall head over heels for her (myself included).



“You want me to explain...the Dungeon Network?” she replied with a slight look of uncertainty.

If I was being honest, everything about her felt entirely out of place. For starters, in *Magical ★Explorer*, she’s sealed within a containment crystal of super-advanced ancient magic technology that resembles a magic stone. The containment crystal, created several thousands of years ago, seals away a Maid-Knight homunculus who’d been produced with the most advanced technology of a bygone era.

But what exactly was that thing I’d laid eyes on a few moments ago?

It had clearly been a feathered egg, not some kind of crystal. Then there was this entire place itself—there isn’t a meadow like this in *Magical ★Explorer*.

To top it all off, the fact that there were five variations of her available was also an enigma.

“The Dungeon Network is the Dungeon Network..... Hmm? Pardon me a moment, Takioto Kousuke.”

MKS73 remained suspended in the air as she approached to take my hand.

Something began to seep into my palm, passing through from her slightly chilly touch. Whatever was flowing into me, it wasn’t uncomfortable. If anything, I had this strange feeling like something that had once been my own was being returned to me, a cozy sensation of security and comfort.

“.....”

“Um, is everything all right?” I tried asking her as she stood speechless and slack-jawed.

“F-forgive me. Would you allow me some time to get my thoughts in order?”

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one here needing time to calm down and think for a moment.

After we both composed ourselves, we shared information with each other, and what we understood was:

“In other words, this is bizarre on a fundamental level.”

That was our ultimate consensus.

“That is correct.”

Originally, her Maid-Knight Series was supposed to form a contract with someone similar in role to a Dungeon Master. She told me it was impossible for her to understand how a completely average-looking, everyday individual like myself had been able to form a contract. She also insisted that my latent mana reserves were equally incomprehensible.

That led me to my next question: *What the hell was this “Dungeon Master”?*

“This term refers to an individual who manages the dungeon from

within the dungeon realm. Some use this term to refer to those who have conquered a large number of labyrinths, but I am currently referring to the former definition.”

The explanation only left me more at loss. The phrase *Dungeon Master* doesn’t appear in *Magical ★Explorer* in the first place. The areas in this game exist only to be cleared. There isn’t some sort of “manager” of these places who shows up, even in passing.

“I understand you’re confused, but due to personal reasons, I hesitate to explain things with any more detail.”

“Ummm, what exactly do you mean?”

“I am able to freely discuss information pertaining to the Dungeon Master with the dungeon company, administrators, or similarly involved parties. However, outside of these circumstances, I may not disclose it to the public.”

Well, honestly—

“Considering how little people comprehend dungeons, that’s understandable. As the saying goes, ‘To consider the nature of dungeons is like questioning the nature of death.’”

Since coming to this world, I had read every book I could get my hands on concerning these labyrinths. However, in most cases, there was so little people understood about them that it led to these sorts of philosophical proverbs.

“I believe information has not spread because direct contact is fundamentally rejected. Direct contact between dungeon managers or administrators and sixth-rank individuals is extremely scarce.”

Yet another incomprehensible term popped up. I could get the basic gist of her statement, but...

“What’s this ‘sixth rank,’ then?”

“Well... As I previously mentioned, there are a number of items that I cannot publicly disclose regarding that area of information. Therefore, um, if I am unlucky, there is the chance the company will punish me.”

“A prohibited topic, basically... In that case, you don’t have to bring up anything related to that stuff.”

I didn’t know exactly what the details of this punishment would entail, but it would clearly be bad for her.

With her awkward and uncomfortable expression still unchanged, she began to speak evasively and with hesitation.

“I believe this would be made clear at some point, but, um. Allow me to inform you now. The mana link between myself and Takioto Kousuke has already been opened, and Takioto Kousuke has been configured as my employer.”

Ummm, so...

“That means?”

“I am unable to disobey you, and if you tell me to disclose everything, I must relate any and all information to you.”

Now I got it. Our “contract” was quite the weighty agreement, then. If I wanted to know about the dungeons, I needed only to give the order. You know, though...

“Nah, it’s not something I need to understand that badly anyway. If you can just fill me in on everything that you’re able to share with the average person, that would be a big help,” I told her.

“Thank you very much,” she replied with a bow.

“Now that matters surrounding our contract have concluded...,” she began, changing the subject. Then she shoved her hand into her cleavage and produced a vaguely familiar piece of navy-blue fabric. Why exactly had it been wedged into there anyway?

“I would like you to assign me, an overly mischievous and tremendously popular iteration of the Maid-Knight Series, with a fitting name.”

“Mischievous, huh...? I got a really diligent and serious vibe from you, though.”

In *Magical ★Explorer*, MKS73’s personality changes depending on which version of her you select. But the personality she just referenced wasn’t like any of them.

“I have times when I get serious. Let me ask you, then, Takioto Kousuke, do you goof around when someone is interviewing you? Normally, I pride myself on being a ball of naughtiness, fit to burst.”

I really didn’t get where she was coming from, but oh well, that was fine.

“Well then, guess it’s time to set a name, huh? Hmm, I’m not sure what it would be okay to call you... Is it all right if I think of you as something similar to a homunculus, then?”

I was convinced she would nod her head, but she instead shook it.

“No, I am not a homunculus. Please allow me to make this clear: I am neither homunculus, nor android, nor replicant, nor biodroid, either.”

“What?”

“I was not even created to mimic humans in the first place—I am an angel.”

“A-angel?!”

I couldn’t help sending her words right back to her. The *Magical ★Explorer* version of her who joins your party isn’t an angel. She’s a homunculus.

“Angels are composed of fundamentally different material from humans. We also differ from elves and beastfolk; we’re life-forms that are wholly removed from these organisms.”

Well, since one of the sub-heroines in the game was an angel, I sort

of understood that much, but...

"You must be concerned. Rest assured, however, that I can still perform sexual reproduction and conceive offspring. Although in most cases, the resulting child will not be an angel, but rather share the race of my mate."

"Gee, thanks, but I wasn't really worried about that at all."

I wasn't worried, but I *was* curious, *cough, cough*.

"Is that so...? Tee-hee."

"Why is staring at my crotch bringing such a cheery smile to your face, I wonder?"

"Well then, on to the next subject."

"Oh, we're changing it, all right... I'll derail it if I have to..."

I felt like she had completely seized control of our conversation.

"Pardon me, but it is completely unnecessary for you, my designated contractor, to speak to me so politely."

Now that I thought about it, I hadn't even really seen an anime where the maid-style servants get addressed with polite language. But hey, in Japan, there were still plenty of people who treated servants with respect.

"It's become a bit of a habit of mine... Is it fine if I still use polite language with you?"

"Tch..."

"Wait, did you just click your tongue, or...?"

"Oh, no, I would never. Perhaps your ears are playing tricks on you?"

"O-okay, okay, I understand. I will stop with the—"

"Tch..."

"I—I got it, I got it."

Forcefully correcting my habit...? I felt like it was hard to tell who was actually in charge here...

"There. I look forward to serving you."

At this, she gracefully bowed to me, the familiar navy-blue piece of fabric still held in her hand.

"Um... What's that thing in your hand?"

"This? It is a school swimsuit," she replied, stretching out the article of clothing. It was indeed. The place to write down her name was left blank, but—wait, why did I even care about that?

"It's an additional costume," she continued, sensing my next question. Unfortunately, that answer didn't resolve all the questions floating in my mind.

"Why...a school swimsuit?"

"According to my knowledge on the subject, I was previously furnished with only a maid outfit, but due to the drastic increase in sales following the add-on school swimsuit costume, it has been this

way ever since. The company attempted to sell us without the outfit on another occasion, but sales dropped, and customers flooded them with complaints.”

People cared enough to send in complaints? Seriously?

“I could change into it right now, if you would prefer.”

“No, no, no, no need to change.”

“I see. Leaving the rest to your imagination, then? Very cunning, Takioto Kousuke. In that case, I will place it over my clothes for you,” she replied before spreading the school swimsuit out across her maid outfit and posing with it.

“Hmm, bend forward just a little bit... Wait, no, enough of the stupid stuff. Let’s get back to the topic at hand.”

Huh, what was the topic at hand anyway?

“Hee-hee, my apologies. Now, could you provide me with a name?”

Oh, right, now I remembered. She had asked me to name her.

Well, the player is free to give her any name in *Magical ★Explorer*, so I figured most people went with Nanami. Someone wrote, “Typing out MKS73 on message boards and stuff is a pain; let’s go with Nanami,” and before we knew it, the name had stuck. I myself had gone with Nanami, too.

“Hmm, let’s see... All right, how does Nanami sound?”

At my response, she groaned incredulously and frowned.

“Unbelievable, really. To think you would cheaply adapt my identification number to use as a name. What are you going to do when our thirdborn asks Mom and Dad, *Hey, why’d you name me San, like the number three?* Are you really going to be so flippant about our child’s future?”

.....You know, she had a point. Her argument was sound.

In the game, she’s happy no matter what name you give her, but this wasn’t a virtual world. This was reality. I couldn’t expect the same approach I had used there to always be sufficient. She was a unique, individual angel.

I was thinking up a name for a person, not a pet. I had been too shallow.

“M-my bad, I’ll come up with another...huh?”

As I gazed at her, I trailed off.

“Sheesh, Takioto Kousuke, you are a handful.”

As she spoke, she took a permanent marker she had produced from somewhere or other and wrote the word *Nanami* in hiragana on the school swimsuit she held. Once she finished writing, she then wrote it again in tiny letters on her hand, flashing a quick smile.

She immediately returned to her look of exasperation, but I had definitely caught her smile for a moment. Hugging her newly christened school swimsuit tight, she declared:

“Oh well, coming up with a new name would just be a waste of time. Nanami will do.”

“.....You’re into it, aren’t you?”

“Excuse me? Where in the world would you get that idea, Kousuke Takioto...? Now, if we’re going with Nanamin for a nickname, then which Japanese characters should I use? I have a few candidates of my own if you’d like to see them.”

“‘Nanamin,’ huh? You actually like the name a lot, don’t you?”

Ignoring my comment, she began writing several Japanese characters on the ground with her marker. However, the second option she wrote, *Nanami* in hiragana, was obviously larger than the others. Versions with the characters for “ocean,” “rapeseed,” and “beauty” ended up pretty tiny. Not only that, but the hiragana version was the only one listed twice; she was practically yelling at me to pick it.

“U-uhhh, how about just *Nanami* without using any characters?”

“Whaaaat? Without using any at all, seriously...?” she replied, heaving an ostentatious sigh as she went back and wrote several *Nanamis* in hiragana, adding on hearts to the end. She drew about three hearts each.

“You’re, like, really dang into this name, aren’t you? It’s like you’ve never been so fond of anything else in your life, huh?”

“It’s not ‘you.’ It’s Nanami. Nanamin will also suffice. It’s my pleasure to finally make your acquaintance.”

Now she was ordering me to call her by her name... She was definitely fond of it. But wait, this place looked like it would be a really important spot for magic research and dungeon studies, so should she really be writing her name in permanent marker everywhere? If this became a tourist destination, her name would end up plastered all over social media, too. On second thought, this was still inside a dungeon on private Hanamura land, so I gave up worrying over it.

“Now, continuing on, please confirm the contractor’s title.”

“Title?”

“Yes, to confirm how you would like me to refer to you, Kousuke Takioto. I have put together a number for you to choose from, including: sir, maestro, master, sensei, chief, virtuoso, ace, president, boss, dark lord, kampaku, shogun, pride of (your choice), and a cutesy -cchi suffix.”

“Some of those sound straight out of a samurai flick. What’s the default?”

“It’s set to *Master*.”

Honestly, it felt a little creepy being addressed as Master, but that’s what she calls the player in the game anyway.

“...I guess that works.”

Besides, I did want to hear her call me Master, even if it was only once. Maid cafés? Not good enough. I wanted to hear it from the real deal.

“Then I shall call you Master. Now, how should I refer to other people besides you, Master? The default is currently set to *ignoble worm*.”

“Youch, that default’s real nasty! Why are you normal with your master yet so awful to others? Change it, change it! Heck, when would you even use a phrase like that anyway?”

“Wow, this is some swell weather, huh, ignoble worm?”

“You can make it sound as nice and pretty as you want, but the words themselves are still scummier than a sewage drain!”

“Shall I go with *sewage drain* instead, then?”

“*That’s* what you picked up from me?! They’re not even living creatures at that point. Just speak with proper respect to everyone. That shouldn’t be hard, right?!”

“Tch, as you wish.”

“...Someone, anyone! Tag in and help me keep up with this banter!”

The reason I’d insisted upon going through this dungeon so early on was to make Nanami one of my companions.

Frankly, making Kousuke Takioto into the fastest and strongest character was pretty unreasonable if you were doing it solo. If I had been inside Iori Hijiri, it might have been possible to pull myself up by the bootstraps, but I wasn’t as well-rounded as him. Really, though, even if I were the protagonist, I would have still relied on my friends anyway.

Going solo was seriously inefficient.

Plus, just bringing her into my party came with plenty of benefits.

Nanami can speed up when certain dungeons open up to the player. Thanks to her super-advanced ancient magic technology, she knows secret entry conditions for dungeons and can even lift magic circles that hinder your advancement through these mazes. She can also handle matters that are really supposed to be left to Sexy Scientist, who doesn’t join the party until the midgame.

Even if she didn’t come with those benefits, though, my decision to befriend her had been set in stone.

From my very first playthrough, the *Magical ★Explorer* character I’d utilized the most wasn’t Yukine Mizumori, but Nanami.

The fact that I’d used her more than Yukine was unavoidable, really. Yukine is unavailable for stretches of time when she gets wrapped up with the Morals Committee, and she doesn’t formally join the party

until after you join one of the Three Committees. Starting with the second playthrough, however, an expediency mechanic called the Shikigami Fission System gets added, which allows her to join in on early game dungeon runs.

More than anything thing else, the reason I fell back on her so often was because of her versatility. She was the same type of character as President Monica and Yukine, capable of handling long-ranged, mid-ranged, melee, and even magic. *Additionally*, Nanami could learn abilities that took hold outside of combat, such as thief and gathering skills, which Monica and Yukine couldn't.

Yes, her combat skills are inferior to those of the Big Three. However, she can hold her own against all the other main heroines, save for President Monica. On top of that, she can gather ore and herbs, disarm traps, and unlock locks.

Her higher usage rate was inevitable, really. Of course, I hadn't been alone in this. I was certain most gentlemen made use of her as much as they could.

In the end, though, the most vital reason for using her was her extreme cuteness. The player can choose both her hair color and personality, she's beautiful and versatile, and she swears a lifetime allegiance to you, the protagonist. With all those perks, there was really no way you *wouldn't* use her.

Now, then. While Nanami was indeed good at everything, there was still one problem. Her existence doesn't cause any issues within *Magical ★Explorer*, but she would be a huge social problem for my current self.

"How exactly do I explain to Marino and the others about you living with me?"

I thought about having her move somewhere else, but Nanami shot down the idea.

"Living separately? Ha, you must be joking, Master. The only time I will stray from your side will be when death rips us apart. If this is an order, I will follow it; however, I ask that you prepare yourself to hear *Takioto is a hopeless, masochistic perv* or *Takioto is a horndog who's fine with both little girls and women in their forties* and other such baseless rumors start spreading around," Nanami remarked in opposition to our separate living arrangements.

"It's really hard to tell whether you're extremely loyal or the exact opposite, you know that?"

Incidentally, I couldn't deny I was a masochistic pervert and a horndog. If those kinds of rumors *did* start spreading around, there was little else I could do but point out that where there's smoke, there's fire.

"What if we moved in together somewhere else instead?"

“I hadn’t considered that. But the truth will get out eventually, so it’d be better to just let everyone know from the start. That would also take away my immediate access to the Hanamuras’ facilities, too.”

If would be a big downside if taking lessons with Claris and using the facilities got harder to do.

“In that case.....I am very skilled at meowing like a cat.”

“I can guess what exactly you’re getting at, but that’s obviously never going to work.”

“If you explain that you found me in the rain, shivering in a cardboard box, I can promise I’ll make it into a heartwarming spectacular that will have movie producers knocking down the door.”

If there were a maid out there sitting in a cardboard box, drenched to the bone, I’d be equally primed to accept that the Loch Ness Monster was real, too.

“That sounds like a pretty bizarre film. Depending on how it plays out, it might end up as more of a horror movie, too.”

“Let’s put the jokes aside for now. I have a brilliant idea.”

“I get the feeling it’ll be anything but that... I’ll ask anyway, though.”

“What if you told them that you wished to employ a maid, Master? From what I have gathered, the Hanamura family is very well-off, and it would not be unusual for them to have a housekeeper in the first place.”

I’d braced myself for the worst, but it was an unexpectedly normal suggestion.

“That’s true... Actually, wait, as far as maids go, we do have Claris with us, huh?”

She was living with us as a knight, but she was still supposed to be a domestic servant, too. There were also times when other elven helpers of Ludie’s were around, though they didn’t reside in the house itself.

“I’m sure they won’t be bothered if they have one or two extra maids around.”

“Sure, but that’s not really gonna be enough...”

Claris was the only maid who permanently resided in the house. That was because Sis was so shy around strangers.

First of all, what sort of high school student suddenly says he wants to hire a maid anyway? At least in Japan... On second thought, maybe it was normal in this world for a student to hire one? However...

“Hearing you say ‘employ’ reminds me that there would also be a salary problem...”

From what I could remember from the game, I don’t think it ever shows Nanami getting paid... Not only that, but seeing how she gets dragged through the dungeon on a daily basis, you might as well call it the ultimate incarnation of worker exploitation.

“Maybe if I sold every item drop from the dungeons, it would work out? Actually, even without that, my allowance money is more than enough to provide for someone...”

I received a truly ludicrous amount of pocket money from Marino. If I'd been born and raised in this family from the get-go, my economic sensibilities would be dull as a rock. If anything, I could say my economic sensibilities *were getting* dull as a rock.

Well, I guess I could just be grateful for my current situation and reserve it for Nanami's pay. With that in mind, if I was going to keep the bare minimum left over for myself, how much of the cut would she take?

I was reverse-calculating her salary from my monthly allowance when—

“Huh?”

Nanami let out a gasp.

“Why do you look so surprised?”

She must have thought it was abnormal that I was getting enough money in allowance to support another person.

“...Well, I did not think I would receive payment.”

“Uh, what? Excuse me?” I reflexively shot back at her. Nanami looked bewildered as she began to talk.

“The Heaven Form of the Maid-Knight Servant, 73rd Edition is a little unique—we don't seek compensation.”

“.....What is that supposed to mean?”

“It's difficult to explain, but since we belong to the lowest tier of angels, we don't consider money a necessity to begin with. This extends to me as well. As such, I ask you not to dwell too hard on it. Please consider my wage as unnecessary.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on. How could that be? What was their motivation for working, then? Despite what Nanami had just stated, there needed to be some sort of compensation for one's work; without it, she'd basically be a slave. I wanted a companion, not someone to lord over—even if I was employing that companion with money.

“...No, I'll pay you some kind of salary. That's my final decision.”

“I see.” She sighed. “Even if you pay me, Master, I do not believe I will have any chance to use it.”

“Just think of it as my own self-satisfaction. You can use it on your days off.”

“What? I'll receive days off?” Nanami replied, deeply surprised but with a tinge of excitement in her tone. Then she shook her head slightly from side to side, as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing.

“Wait, you thought you wouldn't have any breaks?!”

“Indeed. Angels at the bottom of the pecking order do not have days

off. As long as we are appropriately supplied with mana or other types of energy, we can work continuously without end.”

“Just what in the world do you live for, then...?”

The angels needed to demand better working conditions. Did they have a union? If not, it was time for a strike. If they weren’t going to get one going, I’d start it up myself.

“As long as I am provided my energy source, Master’s mana and nutrients, I do not see any need for breaks...”

“...Sometime later, we’re gonna think long and hard about your working conditions.”

“I sincerely appreciate your concern.”

I had never known. I had always had a positive image of angels before, but now that was being replaced with an image of exploitation.

I looked on with sympathy at Nanami before she remembered something and began to speak.

“My apologies for derailing the topic at hand, but this area will be getting dark, so I believe it would be best to return home for now.”

At her comment, I produced my Tsukuyomi Traveler and checked the time. It was indeed approaching dinnertime. I had informed everyone I might not make it back before then, but it was a good idea to get home sooner to make sure I didn’t worry anyone.

“You’re right. Guess we’ll head back. Wait, but what’s my excuse going to be?”

Nanami responded by balling her hands into fists and scratching her head with them.

“Meow, meooow, prrrr.”

“...I’ll admit your cat impression is spot-on, but that’s not gonna fly.”

“Welcome back.”

Ludie was sitting on the sofa and leafing through what appeared to be a magic reference book. Neither Claris nor Sis were around. Marino would likely be home shortly.

“I’m back.”

“Pardon me.”

Perhaps because a woman spoke these words, Ludie’s face shot up from her book. She stared at Nanami doubtfully, but the angel’s expression remained unchanged.

“Kousuke, a moment, if you would...”

Immediately putting up her noble facade, Ludie grabbed my arm and dragged me into the hallway.

“What exactly is going on here? Who’s she supposed to be?”

I instinctively recoiled a bit at her low tone of voice, a rarity for her.

“It’s kind of a long story, but also kind of not at all...”

“Huh? What’s that maid about? Just what did you recruit her for?”

Her eyes clouded with irritation. *Why is she so angry?* I wondered.

“Well, see, it’s less ‘recruiting’ and more like I picked her up in the dungeon?”

“Forget it.”

Ludie walked away, as if to say talking to me was a waste of time. I hastily followed after her.

“Good evening. Now, forgive me, but could you tell me who you are?” Ludie asked Nanami with a piercing glare, as if she was trying to threaten her. I tried to step in between them, but the momentary glance she shot my way stopped me in my tracks. They were the eyes of a predator on the hunt.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Nanami, and Master Kousuke Takioto has graciously taken me on as his maid.”

“Nanami, then. Let me introduce myself. My name is Ludivine. Now, allow me to ask why you acquainted yourself with this guy.”

I had been lowered to “this guy” status, but I was too scared to butt in. Nanami, however, responded with a cheerful smile.

“I very much understand the madam’s apprehensions, but allow me to state that there are no such intentions.”

“Hmm... None, huh...? Wait, m-m-m-madam?!”

Ludie was in dismay. Ah, so Nanami’s strategy was to discombobulate her.

Nanami continued matter-of-factly explaining her presence to the elf, whose eyes were still bulging. At this rate, it seemed like her fast-talk would be able to win Ludie over.

“I shall be wholeheartedly devoted to serving as Master’s maid, and of course, in this regard, I will not behave in any way that would be deemed detrimental to him. Naturally, this sentiment extends to you as well, madam.”

“Wait just a minute, who the heck is this ‘madam’ supposed to be?!”

Ludie had returned to her natural manner of speech. She was fairly taken aback from being referred to as my “madam.” I was just as taken aback myself, to be honest.

“Master had informed me that you are the person he trusts most in this world, and you both seem quite affectionate with each other.”

I took a moment to consider Nanami’s words.

“Well, I guess I *do* trust you more than anyone else.”

Yukine and Sis were close, but Ludie was the only one I trusted with all my heart.

“Y-you’re kidding.”

Flustered, with her cheeks tinged pink, she restlessly glanced around

the room. When her eyes then met with mine, her cheeks grew bright red, like a lobster soaked in boiling water. She immediately turned her face away and left with hurried steps.

“No way...”

Nanami started to say something, but the sound of the door opening silenced her.

Sis somehow looked even more listless than normal, but when her sights landed on Nanami, her eyes popped open. Then she turned them toward me.

“...Frustrated?”

“I’m pretty sure there are other comments to make before getting to that one.”

That was the first word out of her mouth after seeing my maid? Maybe she had mistaken her for a cosplaying call girl or something. Not that I would ever ring up one in the first place while I was living in a house filled with women.

“I can also wear a maid outfit, if that’s what you’re into.”

That wasn’t really the point here, either. Though I would absolutely love to see Sis in that uniform. *Mmmm...*a massive view.

As my conversation with her threatened to veer even further off course, Nanami cut in and interrupted.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Nanami, and Master Kousuke Takioto has graciously taken me on as his maid.”

Sis glanced at Nanami for just a moment before immediately turning back to me.

“I can roleplay as a housekeeper if that’s what you’re into.”

“Why, I’d love—wait, no, that’s not it. I want to hire her as an actual maid.”

She frowned in obvious disbelief. Though in reality, the subtle reaction was only noticeable to someone as accustomed to her expressions as I was.

“I’m against it.”

“Um, listen, Sis.”

“Nope, we don’t need one.”

She rejected the proposal instantly. Then, grabbing me by the arm, she pulled me next to her. As I pressed up against her side, she proceeded to wrap her arms around my head. Her hands were a little cold to the touch, and the fragrance of her favorite body soap wafted up into my nostrils. She began to gently stroke my head, which was still filthy from my excursion into the labyrinth.

“Sis, um, I’m all gross from dungeon crawling.”

“No you’re not.”

Looking on, Nanami flashed a cheerful smile much like the one she’d given Ludie.

“Please set your mind at ease, madam,” she began, taking the edges of her skirt in her hands and curtsying gracefully. “I shall be wholeheartedly devoted to serving as Master’s maid, and of course, in this regard, I will not behave in any way that would be deemed detrimental to him. Naturally, this sentiment extends to you as well.”

I felt as though I’d just heard something similar. Her spiel had been enough to beat Ludie back, sure, but Sis was very bad at dealing with other people. Given that Claris was the only maid allowed in the house, it was very hard to believe she would—

“Kousuke.”

Letting go of my hand and placing her hands on my shoulders, Sis excitedly huffed through her nose.

“What a wonderful lady. Good job finding her. You should definitely hire her.”

“Lately, I feel like I understand you less and less, Sis.”

I was so sure it would be utterly impossible for her to agree to the idea. But here was a sudden turn into an amicable resolution.

“Madam, would you be so kind as to tell me your name?”

“Hatsumi Hanamura.”

“Miss Hatsumi, then. I look forward to serving you,” Nanami announced before changing the subject for the time being.

“Master. It’s almost time for dinner. Madam, have you already eaten? If provided the proper ingredients, I can prepare a wide variety of dishes, including French, Italian, Wakoku, and Chinese cuisine.”

“No one’s eaten yet. But it’s fine tonight. We ordered sushi.”

Apparently, it was takeout for dinner tonight.

“Very well. In that case, I would like to get my bedding arrangement in order...”

“We have plenty of open rooms.”

Nanami shook her head.

“Please, I will not require anything so grand. A space in Master’s linen closet would be more than adequate.”

Did she think she was a cat-shaped robot?

“What an appealing place to live.”

There’s definitely something off about your sensibilities, Sis. From my former self’s perspective, I would have wanted to spend a good hour pressing her on what exactly was so appealing about a linen closet when her room was in the very lap of luxury.

“In that case, Miss Hatsumi can take the upper half, and I’ll be on the bottom—”

“Mind if I step in here and start my retorts? First of all, I have a regular closet, not the type you’re describing.”

A linen closet was designed to store Japanese futons, but a closet was designed to store clothes, okay? It wasn’t built for snoozing.

“Fine, I suppose there is no other choice. In that case, Miss Hatsumi, you can have the right side of Master’s bed, while I will claim his left.”

“Ha-ha-ha, oh, Nanami, you say the darnedest things.”

“Yeah, that sounds lovely.”

“Wait, you’re on board with that?! We were talking about *rooms* here, right?!”

Nanami beamed at my reaction. She appeared to be greatly enjoying herself.

“Master, I was obviously joking.”

She shoved me a little bit, as if to say *C’mon, I’d never do something like that*. I was about to pat her on the back, replying *Honestly, you say some crazy stuff*, when it happened.

“A joke...?”

Sis was rendered speechless, a look of utter despair on her face, as if she had seen the end of her life approaching.

““Huh...?!””

Nanami’s and my surprise came at the same time. Without any clue what she had in mind, we fell silent, unsure what to say, when—

“Kousuke, um, a-about what you said earlier...”

Ludie returned to the room, her face still slightly flushed—

“Guess who’s hooooome! With everyone’s favorite sushi in tow! ♪”

And Marino arrived home in high spirits, grinning from ear to ear. Just like that, the scene descended into chaos.

A wide array of expressions adorned the faces of the unrivaled beauties gathered together in the Hanamura living room. Everyone present kept their mouths closed.

Marino, a radiant grin on her face with the high-class sushi laid out in front of her.

Sis, who looked almost no different than usual, yet who seemed to be slightly dispirited.

Ludie, her face still slightly red after randomly locking eyes with me earlier.

Nanami, completely calm and composed, her thoughts a total enigma.

And finally, poor Claris, who had just arrived home into this mess of an atmosphere. Total disorientation. Since she already had a hard time dealing with unexpected situations, the one right now must have been absolute hell.

“...So what exactly is going on here, then?”

Marino was the one to broach the topic. I’d thought about what to say, but it was probably best to explain everything from the start—including that fact that I’d happened upon Nanami in the dungeon.

“...In other words, I found her while clearing the labyrinth and... contracted with her, so I figured, hey, why not employ her as our maid?”

“I see, I see, hee-hee. Now, why exactly would you do something so dangerous, I wonder?”

I was met with a piercing, reproachful glare. The look wasn't only from Marino, but from all the women present here, save for Nanami.

I hadn't thought anything of it when I'd entered the dungeon. I had taken safety precautions as best as I could. But no one here was aware of that. There was no way they'd assume I had knowledge of the dungeon already and that I had prepared for the trip well in advance.

From an outside perspective, it seemed like I'd done something totally reckless. I'd located a dungeon that no one had ever stepped foot in before, then dived in headfirst without telling a single soul.

Yup, if our places had been swapped, I would have been furious, too. Perhaps even more livid than these women were right now. From now on, I really needed to watch myself.

“Well then, um, regarding Nanami here...,” Marino continued, looking over at the maid, who simply returned her gaze without a word.

Curiously, Nanami was being extremely well-behaved. She wasn't butting in on the conversation, telling jokes, or even speaking up at all. What had provoked the change?

Since Nanami conveyed no response, a silence descended over the room for a moment.

Claris was the one to break the stillness.

“I'm opposed to the idea.”

Everyone turned their gaze toward her.

“I—I don't mean to be rude, but we don't know who she really is. I have a duty to protect Princess Ludivine. If we wait until something actually happens, it would be too late.”

I could understand why she would feel nervous about letting an unidentified stranger into the house. Ludie was still a princess, after all. But...since I'd become accustomed to seeing her living out her daily routine around the house, I didn't feel much royal stateliness from her anymore.

Claris's apprehensions were unfounded, though.

“Hmm. Since he says he and the angel have already contracted, it should be fine, right? I can vouch for the safety of their kind's contracts. The only question comes down to whether you can trust Kousuke here or not.”

Marino added indifferently, “And Kousuke should be fine, right?”

Contracts from angels and devils were absolute. This world-building detail is present in the game, too. Though this particular point is

almost completely overlooked, only used a little bit during a juicy event with one of the sub-heroines.

I imagined this plot device held true in this world, too. That was the whole reason why if I ordered Nanami to disclose all of her off-limits information to me, she would have to tell me everything, punishment or not. Granted, I didn't actually force her to do that, so it was unclear if she would actually reveal more or if she would be punished.

"...It's just as she says. We finished forming our contract without any incident. I am absolutely unable to disobey Master," Nanami clarified.

She couldn't disobey me, huh? She had still clicked her tongue when I was overly polite with her, and she'd threatened to spread rumors about me if we didn't live together. Wait a second, wouldn't that mean there was some mistake with the contract, or...?

"B-but... F-fine. What do you think about this, Hatsumi? True, she may be under his orders, but we'll still have a complete stranger under the same roof, right?"

Claris expected Hatsumi to be against letting Nanami live here. Yeah, I was kind of thinking the same, too.

"I don't mind."

"Excuse me?!"

She was in total shock. And I completely understood why. I had just traveled down a similar road myself, after all.

"P-Princess Ludivine! Surely you must be against this..."

At Claris's words, Ludie looked toward me.

"I—I, um... I, too, t-trust Kousuke more than anyone else!" she replied with upturned eyes.

Claris must have assumed that Ludie would have gone along with her. Wide-eyed and slack-jawed, she seemed pretty shocked at this turn of events but could produce no sound in response. If she'd been even a little privy to what had happened a few moments prior, she probably would have been better able to predict everyone's feelings on Nanami. Her somewhat poor timing made me feel pity for her. Since she was always helping me out, it was time for me to do something to console her...!

"Okay then, now that this is settled, let's dig in!"

"Sushi time, sushi time ♪," Marino sang to herself as she readied her chopsticks and began to eat. It was an absolutely inconsequential bit of information, but it appeared she was a big fan of salmon roe.

After eating and finishing up my bath, I made my way over to Nanami. At some point or another, she had deliberately requested to take the room right next to mine, claiming, "This way I can be at Master's side."

I didn't know how serious she was about that, but it honestly made me happy to hear. She also decided on some ground rules with Marino, too. I hadn't been given all the details, though.

"Heading into a dungeon the day after tomorrow? Understood."

With this, she put in our booking. Tomorrow, I would go shopping at the Academy, and the day after, I would challenge another labyrinth.

This time, I'd promised to not to go overboard, informed Marino ahead of time, and would have Nanami with me, so I didn't anticipate any problems.

Parting ways with my maid, I headed toward my room.

I had intended to go over my plans for the next day, but there was something more important in front of me.

Had I left the light on while I was gone? Light was leaking out from the door, which was slightly ajar.

".....Hmm. Okay. *Pheeeeew.*"

I took a deep breath, then pushed it open and peered inside. Thank goodness. I wasn't the one who had left the light on.

I could make out my bed in front of me. The area around it was littered with clothes that someone had apparently taken off. Among them was a brown sweater, a red skirt, and a pair of black leggings. Yup, I definitely remembered seeing someone wearing all these items earlier that night.

Her back was turned away from me. I couldn't be certain, but judging by the way her side was rhythmically moving up and down, she seemed fast asleep.

All right then, why exactly was Sis sleeping in my room right now?

Taking another deep breath, I folded up the articles of clothing scattered across the floor. Then I turned off the lights and quietly exited. My destination was the living room sofa. After adjusting the air conditioner, I stretched out wide and lay down.

All right.

I had successfully cleared a dungeon. It had been a wonderful day.

There would be another long one tomorrow. Good night.

Despite being on campus for the first time in a while, my objective wasn't to attend class.

"Let's see, I picked up the magic sigil stones, so I'm not forgetting anything, right...?"

"Master, you still haven't bought your dessert reward for a job well done."

Did she think I was a businesswoman in her mid-thirties? Was this for Marino, maybe? Or maybe Nanami actually wanted to eat some for

herself? Hold on, before any of that—

“I’d been trying not to bring this up, but what exactly are you doing here, Nanami?”

I had entrusted her with the scheduling surrounding the trip into the labyrinth tomorrow. I didn’t remember asking her to do anything *today*, though...

“Where Master goes, Nanami follows.”

“I really don’t understand what that’s supposed to mean...”

“There’s only so much I can do back at the house, so I thought I might as well come with you,” she clarified, picking up on what I was trying to get at.

Now that I thought about it, she did have a point. She would have just been looking after things with Claris while everyone was out.

“But is it really okay for a non-student to come here?”

“I have already received permission from the highest authority...a one-worded ‘sure.’”

This must have been what she’d been talking to Marino about last night. That being said...

“I’m kinda worried about the Academy...”

Sure, it had been fine up until now, so I imagined it would continue be okay, but I was still concerned, to be honest.

“I’m sure she doesn’t hand out permission to other people that easily...”

While she spoke, something seemed to grab her attention, which she pointed out with a conspicuous glance. As I followed Nanami’s gaze, I laid eyes on a petite girl, her hair in pigtails.

“Oh, Kousuke, and.....a maid?”

“Katorina?”

Standing there was Katorina.

It must have been a bit surprising. Her sights remained on Nanami. Actually, there was no way she wouldn’t be taken aback. After all, this was a school campus, an academy where everyone wore school uniforms. What would a girl in a maid outfit be doing here? But of course, she was actually *my* maid...

I needed to introduce Katorina to Nanami, but how exactly to describe her? I could leave out the fact that she was an angel, but she was indeed a maid, albeit a bit of a weird one...though that went without saying.

“This is a maid? Named Nanami.”

“Okay, seriously? What kind of explanation is that? Anyone looking at her can tell *that*. If she came off as anything different, I’d like to know.”

“She’s absolutely right. That explanation didn’t nearly suffice. You didn’t include the ‘stunningly beautiful’ part. Please do it over

correctly, Master.”

Katorina gave an incredulous look, as if to say, *Is this master-and-servant relationship really okay?* Allow me to answer that for you—it probably wasn’t.

“Nanami, this is Rina Katou. I call her Katorina. Let’s see, she’s skilled at melee combat and good with daggers.”

“Miss Katorina, then. I am Nanami, the stunningly beautiful maid in service to Master Kousuke Takioto. I pride myself on having professional-level skills both in handling a knife and my Master here.”

“Uh, couldn’t you have tried a bit harder on my intro? Putting that aside, though, this power imbalance you two have got going on is kind of concerning.”

“I get a little worried myself sometimes, to be honest...”

“How could you say that after getting a hold of a perfect servant in me? You do know I’m blessed with good fortune, right?”

“Sure, but none of that good fortune is coming my way, is it?”

“The sight of a cheerful young beauty ought to make Master happy, too.”

“That’s a great point.....!”

I saw the light. Nanami was absolutely right; seeing my favorite girls smiling and laughing would bring me happiness, no doubt about it.

“Yup, I get it now. You two were practically made for each other.”

Katorina might have had a point there. Oh well, that was enough of that.

“Oh, wait, what’s going on today? Afternoon classes are still happening, right?”

“Normally, I’d be attending class with Iori, Orange, and the other melee fighters, but today, I wanted to raise my Unlocking and Trap Detection skills, so I went off on my own. And you know what happened? The stupid instructor isn’t even here today! Honestly, it’s ridiculous.”

“Isn’t that sort of thing displayed in the Tsukuyomi Traveler?”

The device could access a website that displayed this sort of class information. Looking there as a reference worked fine, though once you got the schedule drilled into your head, showing up to class without checking beforehand did happen.

“I know, I know, okay? It was my mistake.”

She walked together with us in an angry huff. Still, there was something bugging me.

“Hey, Katorina, are you really okay with this?”

“Excuse me? What’re you going on about now?”

“I’m talking about this situation here.”

When I looked around, I could tell there were people staring in our

direction. Most of them were focused on Nanami, but there were also plenty of onlookers sending hostile glares my way. Katorina would surely get her own share of curious glances, since she was tagging along with us.

“Huh? What about it? Listen, I don’t think you’re a bad guy. And anyone can think about me or talk about me however they like. I don’t care... Hold on, what’s happening over there? Let’s take a look.”

Katorina pointed something out, jogging ahead of us.

As I took a step forward to follow her, Nanami spoke up in a hushed tone beside me.

“How can I put it? She’s a wonderful and straightforward girl indeed.”

I agreed. Katorina was a really good person. If anything, finding a *bad* person in *Magical ★Explorer* was the hard part.

Giving chase, we caught up with her to notice a collapsed girl nearby, plus a boy looking down over her. A crowd of bystanders had circled up around them.

“C’mon, hang in there!”

“Get up! You can do it!”

Two people approached the girl, pleading. The battered rabbit-eared girl groaned and tried to move but couldn’t manage it.

Minister Benito watched on impassively, boredom plain on his face.

Then, seeing Katorina’s expression change as she beheld the scene, I grabbed her with my Third Hand. I got the feeling that she might go charging in depending on how things played out.

“Hey...what do you think you’re doing?”

“It’s okay,” I declared confidently. I recognized the bunny-eared girl on the ground.

We weren’t the only ones to come rushing over at the commotion.

Out of the crowd stepped a girl with fiery-red hair. Then, after looking from the girl collapsed on the ground to Benito looming over her, the red-haired girl’s expression completely transformed. She stepped in front of him, placed her hand on her rapier, and scowled at him.

“Benito? Mind explaining yourself?”

“Explain myself? Is that even necessary? She’s the loser, I’m the winner. As you can see.”

This time, a white-haired girl stepped forward and headed over to the bunny-eared girl. Her outfit confirmed she was Saint Stefania. She materialized a magic circle and began casting a healing spell.

The woman I had previously gotten a glimpse of, Student Council President Monica; Saint Stef, who assumed the presidential role of captain within the Morals Committee; and Benito, who led the Ceremonial Committee, were all gathered together, right here, at this

exact moment.

Minister Benito and President Monica began to argue about the collapsed girl.

“Listen, Benito. I’ll admit it—you are very skilled and powerful. But this is definitely going too far.”

“And I recognize that you have talent yourself, Monica. But the thing is, you’re too soft. To be perfectly honest, I’m actually doing everyone a kindness by showing off my skills for all to see. Now, you there. Stand up. I haven’t even broken a sweat yet. You didn’t manage to get a single speck of dirt on me, did you?”

The girl, fully healed by Saint Stef, glared daggers at Benito and started advancing toward him, before her friends held her back. Then she was reluctantly dragged away from the area.

“Honestly, you’re such an eyesore. You really should just drop out and be done with it,” Benito muttered as he watched her leave.

Slowly, a red aura, like a shimmering heat haze, rose up around President Monica. It was fire element mana, not unlike her own fiery red locks. The energy flowing out of her was becoming visible.

“Hey, Minister ‘has never once gotten better grades than me’ Benito. If you’re so eager to fight, I’ll be happy to oblige.”

The head of the Ceremonial Committee narrowed his eyes. Then brownish-yellow-tinged mana began to flow from him. His earth element magic looked as though it could stand firm against even the mightiest of blows.

“Oh, what’s this? If you’re challenging me to a fight, I gladly accept... I’ve felt this way for a while. That you’ve been needing to suffer a huge defeat at least once. I mean, from the very beginning, I didn’t think someone so optimistic and naive as you was suited for the position of student council president. Hey, now that’s a good idea! Why don’t you resign before I beat you bloody and force you out instead?”

The mana radiating around Monica grew even more intense.

“Oh...? You think your skills are enough to force me from my position, do you?”

“I’ll admit you’ve got power. But are you sure you’re not overestimating yourself now? You’re so inefficient. And even if you weren’t, you wouldn’t beat me anyway.”

Attempting to cool things down, the saint jumped in between the two of them.

“Why don’t we all take a step back, huh? It seems you’re both in a bit of a bad mood. Let’s leave here for the time being, and—”

However, both President Monica and Minister Benito told her off.

“Stef, the best thing you can do for rotten-brained dolts like him is to give them a good thrashing.”

“Just who will be receiving the thrashing here, I wonder? My apologies, dear Miss Stefania, but this time, my pride’s on the line. If you insist on getting in the way, saint or not, I won’t be able to go easy on you. Not that I really think the Morals Committee’s little mascot can do much of anything here anyway.”

“Wow, how rare for us to be on the same page.”

The air around Saint Stef shifted slightly.

“How *thoughtful* of you to say, Benito. And, Monica, you’re carrying his joke a bit too far. Me? A mascot?”

Mana soon flowed out from Saint Stef as well. This silver-white substance was light element mana, emblematic of holiness itself.

“If the two of you won’t stop your bickering, then I really have no choice but to bring out my power as well.”

As the three’s overwhelming mana washed over them, the mood of the onlookers grew dour. Normally, they’d all be cheering their support for President Monica and Saint Stef.

“What the hell’s up with the atmosphere here?”

A perilous situation, threatening to explode at any minute, with an enormous amount of mana flowing in the air. The bizarre mood subsumed everyone in the area. There was so much pressure that even Katorina froze stiff next to me.

“So this is what level the Three Committees are on. These are the presidents who wield the most authority and most combat prowess in all of Tsukuyomi Magic Academy...”

She was right—the Three Committees were for people like them. They were a place for the Academy’s best, composed solely of the strong and capable. I would have to reach their level on my journey to achieve my ultimate objective. In the end, however...

“I need to surpass them all.”

“Huh?” Katorina replied, turning to me with surprise.

As they watched the Three Committee presidents glare at one another, the students in the area probably thought things would get out of hand at any moment. I didn’t think that myself.

Anyone who belonged to their organizations or who was well-informed would have agreed. For starters, I recognized the girl from the school newspaper whom Benito had beaten earlier. That’s exactly why I understood.

Or maybe not...

“Oh my, and what exactly is going on here, I wonder?”

I had thought something was going to start up if things continued, but it seemed that wouldn’t be the case.

“Principal Marino Hanamura,” someone in the area muttered. The Academy’s principal, Marino, had arrived. I nodded slightly at her appearance. She was the most qualified person to bring the situation

here under control.

“Monica, I wanted to speak to you a bit regarding the student union...”

In response, Monica dispersed her mana and shot a sharp glare at Minister Benito. She then left the area with Marino. Behind them, the saint expressed concern for the injured girl and departed.

Minister Benito was the only one left behind.

He glanced at the mob of people, shrugged his shoulders, and began walking toward us.

Then, he noticed the three of us and came to a halt.

“A maid, huh?”

The corners of his lips raised in a smirk as he examined Nanami in her maid uniform and me beside her. Then he sent mana flying straight at her.

“You know, you two seem to be mistaking our campus for a place to fool around.”

Nanami didn’t flinch in the slightest. Since she’d been standing in front of me to prevent any magic from reaching me earlier, I cut in front of her to stand between them.

I was confronting Tsukuyomi Magic Academy’s absolute authority, the ceremonial minister of the Ceremonial Committee, Benito.

“Do you have something to say to my maid?”

“Something to say? What *isn’t* there to say? Did you come just to flirt with her here? In that case, why don’t you forget about coming to campus and stay at home? You’re able to hire a maid, after all. You must have the money, right?”

Minister Benito continued, glaring at Katorina:

“And are you sure you should be loafing about here? You all are already completely lacking talent, so how about you try putting in some effort instead?”

He turned the mana washing over me toward Katorina. Since I’d just been doused like that, I understood why she started to tremble.

That mana belonged to Benito, the leader of the Ceremonial Committee. Taking all that pressure into her body must have amped up Katorina’s stress and anxiety. But from my read on his mana pool, this was all he had. Mine was overwhelmingly larger than his. Maybe that was the reason why I wasn’t scared of him at all.

I turned to him and decided to audaciously laugh in his face.

“Ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-ha!”

There was silence, as if a cold chill had descended around us. I assumed they were taken aback. After all, here I was mocking the master of evil himself, the ceremonial minister of the Ceremonial Committee, Benito Evangelista.

“Dang, you know, for someone at the top of the Three Committees, I

figured you'd have a more discerning eye."

My reaction was enough to make his haughty expression crumble for a moment. That must have surprised the onlookers.

"Listen up, Minister Benito Evangelista. The way I see it, all these girls you're belittling are masses of pure potential. You need to get your eyes checked."

I glanced behind me. Katorina was thunderstruck, but Nanami looked the same as ever.

"You won't be able to sit there and laugh at us for long. Nanami, me, Katorina—we'll surpass you before you know it."

After I spoke, there was a momentary pause before he scornfully chuckled.

"Is that so? Go ahead and show me, then. I pray that you're not all talk," Benito replied with a smirk before departing the area.

I let out a small sigh and calmed myself down.

Then, in the same moment I turned toward Katorina, I felt a rough impact to my stomach. Grabbing it, I locked eyes with the girl who'd attacked me.

"Hngh, what the heck?"

"What do you think you're doing? Don't make me hit you."

"Don't tell me that *after* punching me..."

The blow to my stomach had to have been her work. She puffed her cheeks out in irritation, glaring at me.

"Like, seriously, why'd you go spouting off all that by yourself?"

"I mean, what else was I going to do?"

"Look, I'll admit, okay, his mana tripped me up a bit, okay...? But I only flinched for a single second. I was going to tell him off right after."

She was pissed with me for picking a fight. Nevertheless.

"Now, now. Look, I was just telling him the truth, that's all."

"Excuse me?"

"I really do think you'll surpass Minister Benito eventually."

Her expression morphed into vacant confusion. Man, this reaction of hers was cute.

"Same goes for me, but I think right now it'll still be difficult to beat a member of the Three Committees, especially the ceremonial minister himself."

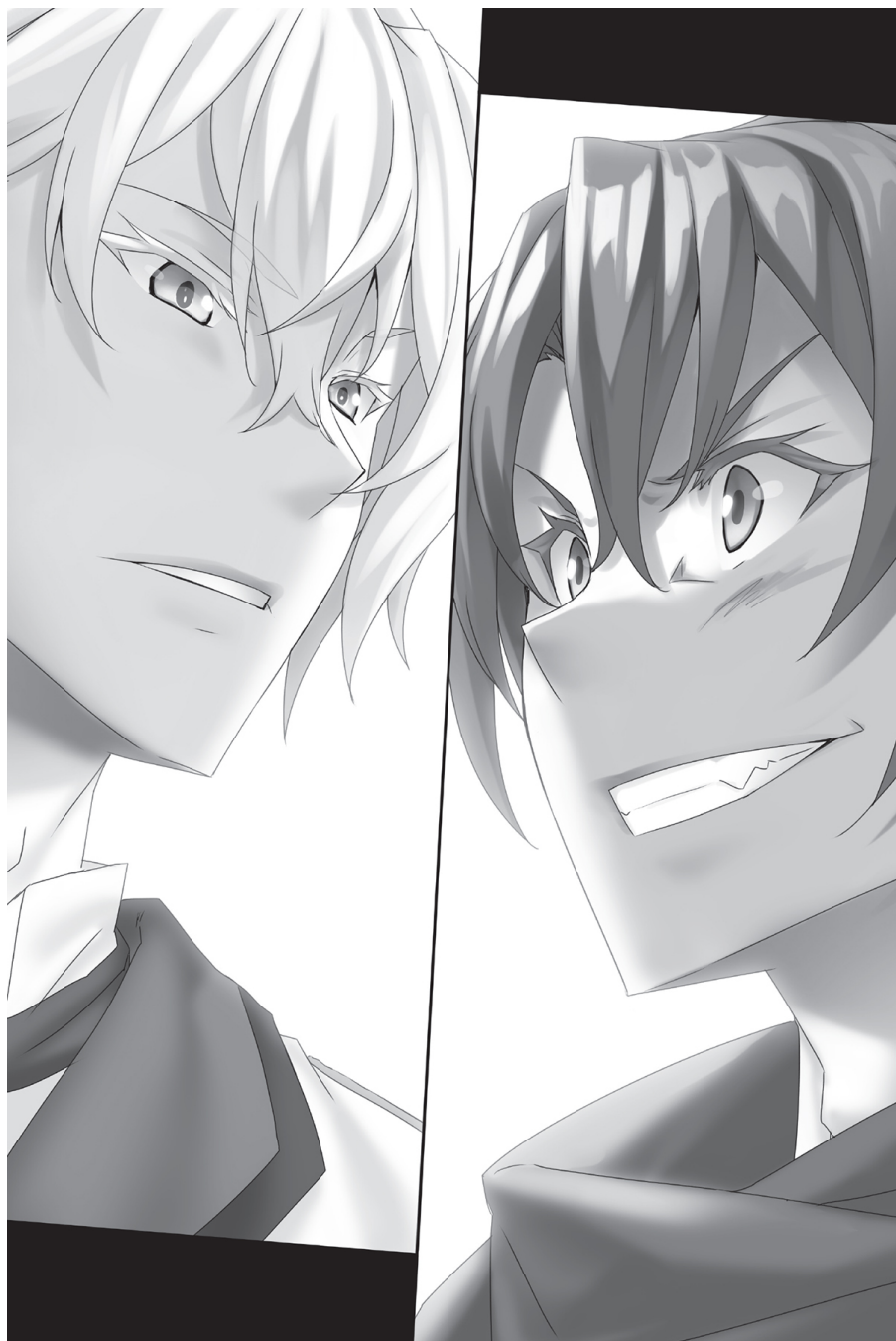
The Three Committees were strong, and it was clear that there wasn't a weak member among them. On top of that, the people we'd met today were especially powerful.

"You remember when you fought me, right? When you said you were going to surpass me, I felt the same way then that I do now. *This girl's gonna be someone big*. Well, I'm pretty sure people like Ludie and Iori are gonna be major players someday, too."

At any rate, I knew. The petite pigtailed main heroine featured on the game's box art came up big in any dungeon she went through. Compared with Kousuke Takioto, she had put in several times more work than me.

Nevertheless—

“Unfortunately,” I continued as Katorina stared at me like a deer in the headlights. “It’s already a done deal that I’m going to become the best there is, so no matter how much work you put in, you’ll always be number two. Sorry.”



“Master, I’m number two, so I believe that would make Miss Katorina number three.”

Katorina couldn’t stop herself from letting out a quiet laugh as she listened to us banter.

“Seriously, you two, what are you even talking about...?”

She shrugged her shoulders in theatrical exasperation, and a smile came to her face. It was the same dauntless grin I had seen on her so many times while playing the game.

“Obviously, *I’m* going to be number one, okay? I’m not letting you or Iori get the best of me, you hear?”

At this, she turned around and walked off. However, after a few steps forward, she stopped.

“Oh, right, Kousuke?” she called out to me with her back still turned.

“What’s up?”

“Thanks for sticking up for me. Today, you were...kinda cool. Just a little bit.”

As soon as she finished speaking, she rushed off.



CONFIG

Nanami and I had arrived at Night Sky Cave, a dungeon included as part of the special add-on disc that came from purchasing the game from Cat Cave Comics. Whenever I visited Akihabara, I'd catch myself buying not only eroge but also plenty of adult manga, too. Even I couldn't say how much cash I'd parted with there. Though I did buy plenty of those from Mango Books, too.

Now, *Magical ★Explorer's* retailer add-on disc doesn't come with any unbalanced or game-breaking special bonuses. The special retail bonus from ComfyMap is the same. They're extremely useful at the start of the game, but midway through the story, you can obtain skills or items that render them inadequate.

Naturally, with its skill reward that would prove immensely useful at my current point, I wasn't going to neglect visiting the dungeon where I could find it.

"Nanami, how is the bow?"

"It is already as much a part of me as my legs and arms. Though naturally, once you reach my level, you are quickly able to master any weapon with ease."

One of the unique traits of MKS73 is that she can wield anything, save for a few unique weapons. As such, the player can build her in a variety of different ways. There were some who made her a melee combat master, those who turned her into a tank with defensive skills and shields, and still others who took advantage of her ability to use all elements of magic by giving her a wand and putting her into a caster and healer role.

It all depends on who her other party members are. Though, a Maid-Knight who makes it through many different playthroughs usually ends up using everything at some point.

"Well, that's reassuring to hear."

This time around, I had asked Nanami to learn thief skills and attack from long range.

Thief abilities were absolute necessities for dungeon crawls. Traps could end up skewering you alive if you weren't able to detect them ahead of time, plus unlock skills could open up locked treasures that

popped up, and I wanted to rely on her to deactivate any booby-trapped treasure chests as well.

Additionally, if she was able to cover my weak point—long-ranged attacks—why, what a wonderful Maid-Knight she would be indeed. That said, the one drawback to all this was that it meant she would sense perv traps, too.

“More importantly, are you sure you’re okay without inviting Miss Ludie?”

“She’s still got school... I’m sure she’d come right along if we asked her on a day off, though.”

I had already informed Marino and Sis that Nanami and I would be going into the labyrinth together. I was surprised at how easily they had given me their permission, though it was probably because Nanami was coming along. They did, however, make me promise that I wouldn’t push myself too hard.

Also, for some reason, Sis had tried to skip school herself to come with me. Marino seemed none too pleased about that, commenting, “Students like Yukine and Ludie skipping class is one thing, but why is a *teacher* skipping school?”

Of course, this dungeon was in the same level range as the Twilight Cavern, where I found Nanami, so I hadn’t expected it to be difficult. We’d gotten pretty far without any trouble already.

Yes, all the way down to the final layer.

“After a long, hard-fought battle...we’re finally at the boss room.”

“Nothing about that was hard, c’mon. That went *really* smoothly, didn’t it?”

Before our eyes stood a colossal door. It didn’t seem like it would just open up for us, though, what with the pale, glowing magic circle laid out in front of it. This world had some really weird doors.

“Well, it seems like the time has finally come...for me to show my true power.”

“You know, I think this every time I hear a line like that, but shouldn’t you really let out your full power right from the start?”

There were definitely some battles out there that could be taken care of if you went all in from the get-go.

“Then shall we move along?” Nanami suggested, and the two of us stepped into the magic circle.

The boss stationed here was the Weretiger. Its speed and strength prove difficult in the early part of *Magical ★Explorer*, but from the midgame onward, it starts appearing in trash mobs, too. There are also unique versions of this creature known as Named Monsters. Those individual weretigers were distinctively stronger than their vanilla counterparts. I remembered that one of them had really put me up against the wall once. On repeat playthroughs, however, they were

little more than experience fodder.

On the other side of the transportation circle, just as I had expected, was a creature with black stripes over yellow fur—the Weretiger.

Its face was exactly like its animal counterpart. However, its body was basically human, except for its coat of fur and the claws growing out of its hands. In addition, it had the muscular physique of a bodybuilder, which made it seem like its attacks would be difficult to deal with. But really, it only *looked* that way.

“Grrrraow.”

Its deep voice reverberated throughout my body. Ready to pounce at any moment, the Weretiger crouched and stared me down, so I glared back.

“Here I go.”

Nanami was the first to act. Filling her bow with mana, she pulled the string back and fired.

When she did, the Weretiger shifted sideways. It smoothly dodged the arrow with a speed that belied its heavyset form. There was quite some space between us, and she had aimed from straight in front of the beast, which was probably why she’d missed her mark. I hadn’t thought her shot would hit, either. She was already holding her next arrow in her hand.

The Weretiger appeared to realize it couldn’t let her keep firing, so it charged straight toward us. But Nanami had already reacted. Her second arrow flew off toward the creature. While it again was able to dodge the projectile, it seemed to be cutting it much closer this time. On top of that, her third shot was already in the air. Nor was it the same type of munition as the two normal ones prior.

Impact Arrow—

It was a skill that could be used soon after first learning the bow, and a slightly quirky one, to boot.

Impact Arrow didn’t deal damage via piercing its target but instead based on the collision force of the arrow. To put it another way, it was like the difference between the piercing stab of a fencing rapier and the blunt force of a throwing hammer.

“You don’t even really need me, do you?”

The blast had enough power to send the Weretiger flying. Despite its attempt to close in on us, the Weretiger was now back where it started.

The first two arrows had been normal shots, not Impact Arrows; she’d actually applied the skill to her third arrow, which landed. It was really obvious that her first two shots had been to feel her opponent out before closing out with the third.

“What are you saying, Master? Of course I do. I need you to stand there to chuckle and say, *Hmph, I guess there’s no need to get my hands*

dirty, ha-ha-ha.”

“That sounds like something the villain says before they end up losing down the line. You know that, right? And as far as this fight right now goes, you really *don’t* need me, do you?”

I was filling my stole with mana to jump into action at a moment’s notice, but it didn’t appear to be necessary.

“If you’d like, I’m fine working the situation so you can participate, Master.”

“I’m usually going up against Claris, so I’m pretty confident I won’t lose. I want to try tussling with it a little, too.”

If at all possible, I would have liked to hone my skills against a variety of enemies. In the game, I’d fought battles with ultimate efficiency in mind, but things didn’t work that way in real life. Ultimately, each monster or person had their own idiosyncrasies, and I needed to understand those while engaging in combat if I wanted to emerge victorious. The balance between efficiency and actual experience was sure to get extremely important from here on out.

I felt that strongly from watching Yukine and Claris.

The Weretiger appeared to believe the next arrow was on its way. It rushed straight at us. I stepped forward and took up a fighting stance with my stole to steel myself for its attack. Then, I placed my hand on my katana and filled its scabbard with mana, ready to draw my blade at any moment.

As the Weretiger grew closer, it held its right arm aloft. Mana began converging in it, and its limb swelled to an enormous size.

With its eyes gleaming and its mouth open, sharp fangs bared, the monster slammed its right arm down.

The impact was weaker than I had expected.

“Yukine and Claris have an abnormal degree of muscle strength, don’t they?”

My stole was more than sturdy enough to take it all.

The higher ranks of weretigers in *Magical ★Explorer* are able to make their whole bodies enormous instead of just one arm anyway. I didn’t know what would happen if one of those weretigers attacked me with its whole body, but the one in front of me was the weakest version of the monster in the game. I could farm it without trouble, so it could prove to be good training.

Its assault repelled, the Weretiger immediately jumped sideways and plunged toward me again. In that same moment, I stood in the direct line between Nanami and it.

To match up against its arm, enlarged anew, I opened my stole out and brushed it aside. Right after I diverted its powerful attack and pushed it off balance, I released the mana stored in my sheath. Its tumbling body, stomach exposed in my direction, was the ideal mark.

A single striking flash. I felt a response in my hands. As its form slowly split in two, the Weretiger disintegrated into magic particles.

“Very well done, Master. VWDM.”

“Why the acronym...?”

Collecting the magic stone it left behind, I looked around the area. I caught sight of a magic circle even farther on, past where the Weretiger had appeared. It was presumably for transportation.

“Doesn’t look like there’s much else, so let’s keep going.”

“Indeed.”

Together with Nanami, I took a lap around the area for a final check before stepping onto the device.

The spatial magic brought us to a stone cave, the same as previous areas of the dungeon. There shouldn’t have been a light source, yet for some reason, the path ahead was brightly lit, and we could see the end. The walls must have been emitting a faint light.

“Master, there’s a treasure chest.”

There did appear to be one where she was pointing. A silver-colored box, decorated with ornaments made from tree branches.

“I assume this question is unnecessary, but what should we do?”

Well, naturally, when face-to-face with a treasure chest—

“Obviously, we’re going to open it.”

It was a matter of course. If you asked me why I went into dungeons, the answer was to collect treasure, no doubt about it.

What the heck was I going to do after collecting this loot? For the time being, I guess I could continue on to a labyrinth I had been avoiding, the Shadow Ruins.

That was the only option, really. It held an item that would be crucial when it came time to challenge the Tsukuyomi Dungeon. I needed to nab that thing even if it meant getting down on my hands and knees to beg for it.

“Master? Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing.”

Nanami stared at me curiously as she walked along. Then I looked down at her feet and—noticed something—

A faint red-white light rising up from the spot where she’d placed her foot.

“Nanami!”

I was glad she was still nearby. Immediately, I grabbed her arm and pulled her close to me. But we couldn’t escape from the spell that activated next. When I looked down, I saw that the magic circle she’d stepped into had spread out all the way under my own feet.

Then we were engulfed by light.

—Nanami’s Perspective—

When I met Master for the first time, I wondered what exactly had happened.

Normally, someone as average as him should not have been able to enter a contract with me. It must have been some kind of bug. Or perhaps it was a side effect of his near-inhuman mana reserves. He possessed enough to make that possible. But in the end, ruminating on this would get me nowhere.

No matter the cause, reality was reality. First, I needed to take action.

Maid-Knights were capable of verifying two things with the knowledge that was copied into their databases: the dungeon and the Dungeon Master.

Some Dungeon Masters treated Maid-Knights and low-tier monsters as disposable tools. They forced us to mechanically and dispassionately carry out our tasks, and when we broke down, that was the end. We didn't have anything like the human rights that Master considered exceedingly important.

Indeed, normally, we didn't have any rights at all.

I only had access to the knowledge that had been transmitted to me at the moment, so I had no way to determine if this was still true, but my series apparently possessed the highest quality and highest price tag in the industry. As such, we were treated comparatively well, it seemed, but that was still only in comparison.

And that only held true if our masters understood our value. It was the same with art. If you could detect the artistry of a deformed rice bowl, you would probably take care of it. But by the same token, if you didn't know its worth, you would consider it a misshapen, awkward-to-use commodity and toss it in the trash.

My biggest value was as a dungeon maid. My selling point was that I could skillfully maintain and operate dungeons, together with a Dungeon Master.

However, I was unable to mention this to Master. Well, I was *able*, but I didn't know how doing that would affect me. Despite that, I was registered with his mana at our time of contract, which meant I was also obligated to give him my absolute obedience.

Although I felt relieved when I informed him that I would be unable to talk in detail about myself, I also wondered if it would be all right with this Master.

After verifying their current situation, one of a Maid-Knight's responsibilities was to learn more about their contractor.

For the time being, I decided to discover his tolerance level. In order to do so, I deliberately tried performing whatever rude acts I could, including discourteous gags and unwanted physical contact.

From this, I learned that unless I did something considerably out of

line, Master would probably not get angry with me. And that despite being a hopeless pervert, he was a bit of a bashful late bloomer. To be honest, our banter together was extremely enjoyable. According to my knowledge base, the ability to exchange silly conversations with another person was key to establishing the most trusting relationship possible.

Even though very little time had passed since our first meeting, Master seemed to have complete faith in me. Despite the fact that he wasn't a Dungeon Master, I felt as though I was fortunate to serve him.

Now, it seemed that what he wanted from me was to accompany him on his dungeon descents. That wasn't what Maid-Knights were built for, but I could still perform this task to some extent. Since I was designed to manage dungeons, I possessed a rich body of knowledge about them.

I wanted to use what I knew to guide Master through dungeons and be useful to him. That was how I felt.

I'd felt the same when we went to that school, strange in many ways, Tsukuyomi Magic Academy. When Ceremonial Minister Benito hit me with his mana, Master stepped forward of his own will and shielded me. Protected a maid like me, a disposable tool. Even though I was the one who needed to step out in front of *him*.

If I was going to be involved in the labyrinths anyway, I wanted to do so together with this Master. I wanted to laugh together with him. I wanted to support and help him.

And yet what was I doing now?

I am a dungeon administration maid. A maid born in a dungeon, who would expire in a dungeon. Despite this, for some reason, I let my guard down in front of a treasure chest. For some reason, I didn't shove Master away when he tried to save me.

On top of this, we were transported to the absolute worst conceivable place—an extra floor.

These special layers contained the very strongest beasts in the dungeon. The monsters placed here could very well be too much for us to handle. In addition, they generally rendered escape items ineffective.

Why, at the exact moment I resolved to serve this Master of mine, did I have to mess up things like this?

I had no energy for a single wisecrack.

He might harbor negative feelings for me now. He could die. I felt my chest tighten when I imagined such possibilities.

For now, I needed to apologize for my blunder.

“Please allow me to express my humblest apologies, Master.”

If asked whether we were lucky or unlucky, I would say it could have been worse.

After tripping the spatial magic trap and getting teleported to an unknown floor, the first thing Nanami did was apologize. She got on her knees and pressed her head down to the floor, but I immediately grabbed her with my Third Hand to set her upright.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying sorry about.”

“On top of stepping into the trap, I got you caught in it.”

“Oh, what, that?” I reassured her. “Don’t even worry about it. I didn’t notice it, either, so we’re even, right?”

“But you told me to watch out for them...”

“Sure, I may have asked you to do that, but I didn’t ask you to use Find Traps back there. Besides, I think it’s impossible to get one hundred percent of them anyway. And what’s this about you getting me caught in things?”

I shrugged my shoulders with exaggeration.

“That wasn’t your fault—I jumped in because you had the gall to go off and have fun without me.”

“I appreciate the support, but that’s obviously not the truth.”

I didn’t understand why, but Nanami was awfully disheartened. Even after I tried to joke around a bit and assure her it wasn’t a big deal, she still looked depressed.

I took out a circle-engraved magic stone to get us to the surface, but even after I’d doused it in mana, it didn’t react at all. That told me we were on a special floor instead of a normal section of the dungeon. Of all the times to...

“Why don’t we just keep going for now? Looks like the dungeon escape item Marino gave me isn’t going to work, either.”

Losing your composure was a funny thing; seeing someone in even more unrest than you was actually pretty soothing on the nerves. To be honest, I was pretty shaken up. But seeing Nanami’s trepidation made my own discomposure feel smaller by comparison. Before I knew it, my nervousness gave way to resolve, as though I were being urged to do something about that situation.

“Looks like it’ll be easier than I expected.”

To be honest, I wasn’t much concerned about the dungeon itself.

A few of the dungeons in *Magical ★Explorer* had a rare chance to teleport you to an extra floor after you cleared them.

Sometimes, this bonus layer housed an additional boss, was filled with treasure, featured a sexy reward, or would lead into *another* layer. This would all vary from dungeon to dungeon. In a speedrun, if you didn’t luck out and receive the right bonus layer after clearing certain areas, you would have to reset.

The extra layer we were currently on appeared to contain a boss. An extra floor with treasure and a spatial magic circle would have been the best result, but unfortunately, neither were in front of us.

The only thing that gave me pause here was that I didn't remember our current dungeon having an extra floor in-game, so I couldn't say which type of monster would show up.

Still, knowing the rest of *Magical ★Explorer*, I estimated that the boss would be one or two ranks stronger than the rest of the dungeon. It would probably give us a hard time, but I figured we'd manage to pull through somehow. This might have been too optimistic, but since Nanami was disheartened and assuming the worst, I thought it best to lighten the mood with the most positivity I could muster. It felt like our positions would typically be reversed in this situation. Nevertheless...

"Say, Nanami, did you come down with a disease that makes you blame yourself for everything, or what?"

"That's not it, but..."

Unusually, she kept her eyes glued to the ground and avoided my gaze as she responded. Although she could say some pretty outlandish stuff, she was serious at her core. She'd been similarly solemn right after establishing our contract.

"Well, stop blaming yourself, then. I didn't even notice, either, you know. If you weren't here, I definitely would've stepped on the trap myself."

"You may be right."

"So why are you being so hard on yourself, then?"

When I asked Nanami this, I noticed her tremble for a moment.

"Do I need to answer that?"

"I mean, if you don't want to talk about it, then you don't have to..."

"Master, that right there is what I'm talking about. That's the problem."

She shook her head before apologizing for losing her composure.

"In truth, all the knowledge about the dungeons that we Maid-Knights possess is simply copied into us. That's why I'm well aware that any number of similar units could take my place."

"...You did say something along those lines, huh?"

"I am filled with guilt. I thought you would be disillusioned that my own personal circumstances prevented me from providing you information that I should normally be able to give you without issue. On top of that, I was worried that you would see me as making too many mistakes. That's why I insisted on following behind you, despite my wish to be someone you could rely on... So when a trap sent us flying to an extra floor of all places, I couldn't help but worry..."

From what I was hearing, a variety of factors were causing her drop in morale.

“C’mon, like that would happen. Disillusioned? What are you talking about? I don’t think that even a little. Besides, I make plenty of my mistakes myself, too.”

“...Master.”

That’s right—there was no way I would feel disappointed in her.

“Nanami. There’s something I want you to know,” I said, closing my eyes. An image of Ludie and the others came to my mind.

“See, I want to become the strongest in the world.”

It was a huge goal. I wasn’t even sure if it was attainable.

“To be honest, just a little while ago, I was in a really tight bind, where Ludie’s life was at stake.”

“.....Really?”

“That’s right. I even forced an upperclassman at the Academy to get involved in it, and I was totally focused on wanting to save her.”

It was a miracle that both Ludie and I had made it out alive.

“And see, that’s when this dream came to me. Ludie, that upperclassman, Marino, Sis... I realized I wanted to become powerful enough to protect them all. That’s why I want to become the mightiest in the world.”

Strong enough to guide every single heroine in *Magical ★Explorer* to her happy ending.

“I know that might be a simpleminded way of thinking. Still, I really like that I am the way I am. Though I guess that’s not really the point right now.”

Right, that didn’t matter. There was something else I wanted to get across to her.

“And see, Nanami, you’re included in that group of people I want to protect.”

I’d loved Ludie from the start. I’d loved Yukine from the start. Through my experiences in *Magical ★Explorer*, I’d learned what was troubling them, helped them resolve their issues, went on adventures with them, and grew to love them.

Then, after coming to a version of that world made real, my feelings toward them only grew more powerful.

I saw things I couldn’t have ever imagined in the game. I witnessed Ludie’s eyes spark as she slurped up super-rich miso ramen. I caught her limply sprawled out on the sofa, desperate for my mana.

Watching Yukine’s silhouette as she trained was far more captivating to me than looking at the beautiful, World Heritage-quality setting where she practiced. Talking about ordinary, everyday topics with her afterward, as though her martial arts switch had been turned off, was something I truly treasured from the bottom of my

heart.

Being able to enjoy moments with the people I like made my love for them grow even more.

However, that love wasn't only limited to the major characters. Marino almost never shows up in the game, and outside of providing Iori with a unique magic spell, Sis is pretty much invisible.

And yet I came to love them, too.

Marino's jokes could be a bit tough to handle sometimes, but she really did care about me. Even though she didn't talk much, Sis was kind and cared for me like a brother, and she sometimes even slipped into my bed while I wasn't looking, for some reason.

Katorina, Orange, and Iori were the same, too—chatting with them was a blast, so I really did end up liking all of them.

If any of them were in trouble, I would want to go and save them.

That feeling was no different with Nanami.

True, we hadn't been together for long. But despite the fact that only a short time had passed since our first meeting, I was already fond of her.

"At first, I thought, *Just what is with this girl and her weird personality?* I'll admit. But you know, chatting about absolute nonsense at home or as we adventure through the dungeons, it's all been fun."

Indeed, I enjoyed it all.

"I'm not sure how you feel about it, but now I really love our idiotic back-and-forth banter. But maybe you actually hated all that. Maybe you had no other choice but to go along with me because of our contract."

"I did not...dislike that. We work in dungeons, and we die in dungeons. I'd simply thought that was all there was to us Maid-Knights," she replied, turning her eyes back to the ground again.

Suddenly, a thought struck me—perhaps the dungeons were weighing her down. Perhaps she was unconsciously linking her existence with their existence. But was the link between her and the dungeons actually inextricable?

People say that common sense is nothing more than the collection of biases you amass by the time you turn eighteen. Maybe Nanami had mistaken her own biases for objective truth. Maybe she had become a prisoner to her own status as a dungeon maid.

"Nanami. I want you to answer me yes or no. Do you absolutely need to stay inside a dungeon?"

"That's not necessarily the case, no."

"Are there any maids who live outside them?"

"...I believe so."

Well, in that case, it was time to really speak my mind.

"See, there's something I've always thought. Life has rules, sure, but

despite that, you can really do whatever you want.”

I let out a small sigh before I continued.

“You can go wherever you like, enjoy yourself however you like, and eat whatever you like... Heck, I think that finding the things you enjoy and making them happen is what life’s all about. You really can do whatever you want. So you gotta search for the ways you can spend your days richly and enjoyably.”

Before going on, I stopped to take a moment to breathe.

“This might be a bad example, but say a beautiful girl took a water bottle she bought with a dollar, took a sip, and sold it at a hundred times the price. Don’t you think that’d be a pretty lucrative business? Sounds like easy money, doesn’t it?”

“...That truly is an awful example, you know.”

“Yeah, I have to agree... Oh well, that’s not important. Still, you think that’d sell, right? That it’d be profitable?”

“Well, thinking about it from an ethical perspective...”

“It all depends on how you go about it. If you can’t carry your luggage by yourself, then just call someone to help. Either that or carry it with a machine or magic. If a powerful enemy shows up, you don’t need to fight it head-on, fair and square. Instead, you can just take it down by having everyone pummel it with ranged items.”

Basically—

“You’re just getting caught up in a weird way of thinking; this world is totally free. And listen: If being at my side gets miserable, or I start to burden you, then I want you to annul our contract. Then—”

That’s right. There was one next step.

“Be free.”

Nanami instantly raised her head.

“As for my desire to be the strongest, it’s like I just said—I want to protect everyone... I want everyone to keep smiling. Ludie. Sis, Marino, my upperclassman.”

President Monica, Saint Stef, Shion, too, along with Iori, Minister Benito, and Orange, even if they weren’t heroines, really—I wanted everyone to stay smiling. In the end, that was the long and short of it.

“And I want you to keep smiling, too, Nanami. That’s what I want.”

That was it. That was what it was all about.

“Now that I think about it, I took having you by my side for granted, but that was me being selfish, wasn’t it?”

Right, wanting to be together was selfish. I’d thought I was hot shit for giving her money and time off, but I was really just forcing this all onto her.

“You have your angel contract, right? If being bound to me right

now is making you miserable, then I want you to annul it right now. If you think it's grueling being here, then I don't need any of that nonsense. I just want you to be free."

That's right—I wanted her to become happy.

"You can go live somewhere else with whoever you want. Obviously, you can live on your own, too. If you continue being a maid, you can work for whoever you like. I'll support you until you're independent. Personally, though, well... I'm not sure I can give you much of a salary, but if I could have it either way, I'd want you to stay with me."

Being together with her was fun. That's why I wanted her to stay. I felt that way from the bottom of my heart.

"I mean, look, I really value our time together...and you're really helpful in the dungeon, too... I guess I'm saying that I'd like your help in becoming the strongest, but, well, I don't want to force it on you or anything, it's just..."

"Hee-hee, tee-hee-hee-hee."

I was going back and forth, trying to decide how to express myself, when I heard Nanami chuckle. Her hand was over her mouth. I must have said something hilarious. Her prior dejection had vanished completely.

"Master, are you stupid?"

"...I don't think so."

"I've discovered a very, very big weakness of yours."

"Weakness?"

"Yes, it's both an enormous flaw and the source of your strength."

With this, she smiled warmly, her eyes squinting tight. Nanami had smiled before. But I couldn't be sure if I had ever seen her smile like this. Her expression was filled with affection, as if she was both embracing and watching over me. She was almost like an exasperated owner scolding their small pet, beaming all the while, without a hint of real anger.

Wow... I didn't know she could make these kinds of faces, too.

"It is a hole far too big to cover, a huge, gaping chasm. It makes me wonder just how it got to be so large, really."

"...I have a flaw like that?"

"Very much so. It's enormous—so huge that you probably would have no choice but to give up on your dream, Master. But leave it to me."

Nanami curtsied on the spot.

"I shall cover up this opening of yours. I shall support you..... Oh, you mentioned something about annulling our contract just now, yes?"

She looked at my face and shook her head with a smile.

"I utterly refuse."

"Utterly...?"

"Yes, absolutely. No matter what you say, contract annulment is out of the question. Did you not know? Once you equip me, I can never be unequipped. You couldn't do it even if you wanted to."

It made me a bit happy to hear her say that. Still, I couldn't keep myself from chuckling.

"How would I know that? And what are you, some cursed piece of gear or something?"

"Oh, Master, you say the silliest things. I am an angel, of course. Obviously, that would make me a *blessed* piece of gear, would it not?"

"Good point...!"

"Hee-hee."

Looking at Nanami's triumphant smile, I instantly guffawed. Then she, too, let out a peal of laughter.

"A boss room, it looks like."

"Yup, boss room, all right."

We hadn't been walking for long. But the floor itself must have been pretty small, because we reached the boss room in no time.

"Master, I have a thought."

"What's that?"

"Our upcoming opponent is sure to be difficult. Both our strength and willpower will be important factors in this confrontation."

Well, she was probably right on that front. She hadn't said anything I disagreed with.

"As such, I think it is important here for you psych me up for the battle ahead."

"I mean, I'd love to if I could, but what should I do?"

"It's very simple. You need to elaborate on how much you need me."

"Ummm?"

"Come now, you said so yourself just a few moments ago, did you not? 'Nanami, I wub you, stay with me, without you I'll die,' and so on and so forth."

"Did someone tamper with your memories, or...?"

I can't deny I'd blabbed something similar, but... Earlier, it felt like there was this mood in the air that made it possible to say that stuff normally. Now, though, it was a bit embarrassing.

"Poor wittle Nanami can't fight without hearing you say that."

"Where the hell did that voice come from?"

Well, I guess I didn't have much of a choice if it meant getting her ready to fight. But, um, I wonder what it was. The previous

atmosphere had made this a lot easier to say.

“...I—I have faith in you, Nanami. I want you to stay by my side.”

I finally managed to get the words out, only to be met with a cool stare.

“Oh, great, you went and said it,” she said, frowning. “Master...were you aware? Only a real hottie can get away with saying a line like that, you know.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on, I said that because you *told* me to say that. Also, when you put it like that, you make it sound like I’m *not* a hottie.”

“You certainly don’t seem to think of yourself that way.”

If you asked me outright whether I was or not, well...

“I guess you’re right. I don’t think I’m that good-looking, really.”

“I hate to say it, but you seem like drop-dead hunk to me right now, so I’ll let it slide,” Nanami said before flashing a big mischievous grin.

“That’s rich coming from someone who refers to themselves as ‘stunningly beautiful.’”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

Somehow, I got the feeling that there was no way we could lose this one.

“All right, Nanami. Let’s show this boss what for.”

“Absolutely, Master.”

It was standard practice to confer the title of boss to the strongest creature in the dungeon. That was as much the same in the Beginner’s Dungeon as it had been in the Palace of Worldly Impermanence, where Ludie had been locked away. There were certain labyrinths that bucked this trend, though.

Areas with extra floors were one example. If there was a boss on a bonus layer, it would, in all likelihood, pack even more of a punch than its regular counterpart.

Perfectly following this rule of thumb, the monster appearing before us very clearly seemed to be the strongest creature here.

It stood a bit taller than a full-grown man. Its body, however, was covered in white fur with a black stripes, and its face was that of a tiger.

“You know, I feel like I saw something pretty damn similar to this guy just a few minutes ago...”

As weretigers went, the White Weretiger ranked pretty high. Although its body and face didn’t look that different from its weaker variants, its fur color and combat capabilities were another thing entirely.

The monster glared at us before mana began to emanate from its

body. Then, little by little, it began to grow in size.

“Daaang...”

Its once human-sized form quickly surpassed ten feet in size, and its arms thickened out to about the width of my torso. The pressure I felt from this thing was in a completely different league from the previous Weretiger.

I got the sinking feeling I was probably up against something beyond my current skills. However...

“That scarecrow’s gotten quite large indeed. I wonder, does it not know that bigger doesn’t always mean better?”

But somehow, seeing Nanami act the same as ever made me feel like we really *could* win this.

“Looks like it’s gonna knock its head on the ceiling, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed... That reminds me, it’s getting close to dinnertime. What would you like? I recommend the tiger meat.”

Staring hard at the White Weretiger’s meaty arm, I nodded.

“Looks a bit tough, but I’m sure it’d be delicious.”

“Tonight’s main course, whole roasted tiger, Master and Nanami on the side.”

“That’d mean the two of us were getting cooked up, too!”

“As long as I’m being prepared with you, Master, I wouldn’t mind in the slightest.”

Faced with a monster that was clearly guaranteed to put up a tough fight, it looked like we would be able to challenge it while being as relaxed as normal, or maybe even more so.

The White Weretiger seemed to hear our nonsensical banter and began charging toward us. Despite its extraordinary size, its footsteps were completely silent. The fur made it impossible to tell, but did it have feline paws, too?

“Here it comes, Nanami.”

As I stepped in front of Nanami to shield her, she drew back her bowstring.

The moment her arrow flew, the battle began.

The White Weretiger immediately jumped out of the way and charged at us. Like its lesser relative, its movements were extremely swift. Only this time, they were much faster.

Before the second arrow flew, the White Weretiger was already in front of me. With speed completely eclipsing its earlier counterpart, and with an arm twice the prior’s size, it swung down on top of me.

“That was pretty good, gotta admit.”

I was glad I’d planted my feet sturdily on the floor, bracing myself. If hadn’t, I probably would have been knocked on my backside.

Next to me, Nanami’s arrows flew toward the monster. She had been

aiming for an opening during its attack. Unfortunately, it had already jumped backward and shifted its position to the east.

“It’s a quick one, that’s for sure.”

It felt a bit like all of the abilities of a normal weretiger had been pushed one level stronger.

The White Weretiger immediately pounced toward us. Tracing its path, I swung my Third Hand at it.

Its strength was about on par with the Heartless Ogre.

Which was exactly why I had room to breathe.

I hadn’t been doing nothing since the time I had saved Ludie. Every day, without rest, I had repeatedly trained over and over again, building up my strength.

No way was I planning to lose to a monster of this level; right here, right now, there was someone I wanted to protect.

Putting my hand on my katana, I built up mana in its sheath. In a surprising turn of events, the White Weretiger immediately leaped back when I did this, creating distance between us and watching me cautiously.

“Looks like its abilities to sense danger are top-class, too.”

Unfortunately for the beast, I considered pulling back to be a bad move, too.

Nanami’s arrow bolted in a straight line toward the White Weretiger.

“It makes you feel bad, really. Come in close, get slashed by Master, move back and get shot by my arrows. It chose the arrows, so that makes me the winner here, Master.”

I had absolutely no idea what sort of competition she was bantering about, but it didn’t really matter. She seemed to be having fun, so I figured I might as well play along.

“Enjoy your gloating while you can.”

I had no plans to sit here and watch. Dashing toward the dodging White Weretiger, I slammed my Third Hand into it right as it landed back on the ground. The one-note predictability of my attack meant it was able to block it with both its arms, but this was exactly what I had planned. Instantly, I released the mana built up in my sheath and drew my sword.

A single striking flash. Unfortunately, my blade had only left a scratch. It appeared the White Weretiger was being very cautious of my Sword-Drawing Arts. It immediately leaped away. Nevertheless, a single straight gash had formed on its body, which gradually started to ooze blood. I bet the monster thought it had managed to escape—but our attacks didn’t stop there.

Next came a rain of shots from Nanami that poured down on the beast. One, two, then three arrows pierced into its body.

Once again, the White Weretiger jumped back even farther to try and escape. Then, as it landed back on the ground, it activated the mana throughout its body, never dropping its glare our way.

“It’d be nice if this was the end of it.”

Nice and easy indeed, but unfortunately, this much wasn’t enough to defeat an advanced breed of weretiger. When I glanced at it again, I saw that its body had grown even bigger. Moreover, it had started to morph into something more tigerlike.

Full Bestial Transformation.

This was an ability that all weretigers and werewolf monsters possessed, a skill allowing them to transform all parts of their human body into those of a beast.

Although this put them at the mercy of their instincts, this troublesome skill also powered up all of their abilities with it.

“*Hngh!* I suppose I have no choice but to use my own transformation abilities!”

“If you had any, maybe.”

Nanami continued firing away as she cracked jokes. If we were in an anime right now, our viewers would probably be horrified. Going on the all-out offensive in the middle of a transformation sequence? It was beyond cowardly.

Precisely because this was reality, however, its transformation gave us a chance we couldn’t let go to waste. Seeing Nanami continue to blast away, I activated all the mana in my body and started to run.

Unfortunately, the White Weretiger’s transformation was progressing rapidly. Four legs, firmly planted on the floor. Swelling mana. A colossal body, engulfed in wind, launched down onto the ground.

“*Grwwooooar...!*”

The aura it exuded was no laughing matter.

It appeared normal arrows would no longer have much of an effect, due to the wind enveloping the boss, plus its longer fur and thicker muscles.

The beast squeezed the previous arrows out of its body and sent them falling to the floor. At this, Nanami switched over her bow skill to Explosive Arrow.

Explosive Arrow, the upgraded version of Impact Arrow, was a bow ability that caused an explosion when it connected with an enemy. But Nanami had only just learned the skill, so she still needed more training with it. Its mana efficiency was terrible, so she was likely to run out of gas fast. If it would end the battle quickly, my excessive amount of mana reserves made me extremely well-suited for donations. Unfortunately, however, I doubted the White Weretiger would roll over anytime soon.

Or so I thought, but it appeared the switch from normal arrows to Explosive Arrow had an effect. For a second, the monster's body shook violently.

Even with its fur and muscle being able to repel a sharp arrowhead, it couldn't stop the force of an explosion. Its face twisted into a scowl. While Nanami's barrage appeared to be having some sort of effect, the real question was just how much damage the creature was actually taking.

This time, I attacked the White Weretiger before the smoke could clear. I started mixing in alternating blows with my Third Hand and Fourth Hand. Then, when I saw my chance, I tried drawing my sword and detonating my mana, but the boss took a great leap away from me.

"Grrrrrrr..."

Its danger-sensing abilities were still going strong. Listening to its growl and looking at the completely transformed White Weretiger, I strengthened the amount of energy in my stole.

All right, it was time for phase two.

Right as the White Weretiger opened its mouth wide, the surrounding wind formed blades and flew toward our position. I immediately spread out my stole in front of us to block the attack.

However, it didn't end there. Its follow-up was already upon us.

An arm swinging down from above—for a split second, I remembered my battle against the ogre and stopped myself from blocking the blow. Then I opened my stole with the intention of deflecting it.

I could say that was the right choice. The overwhelming force that hit me after I had supposedly parried the attack was enough to dig my feet into the stone ground. It didn't give me any moments' rest before its next attack.

"Hey, c'mon now, this chain attack stuff isn't fair..."

This time, when it opened its maw, the wind engulfing it scattered its trickling drool into the air. Its animal stench was downright putrid. Still, I wasn't able to try evading it in time. It took everything I had just to focus on defending us.

"Master!"

"It's okay!"

Despite my reply, we were still very much at a disadvantage.

Before I had realized it, more blades from its swirling winds assailed me, and its right arm, left arm, and tenacious jaws came at me again and again.

Even when I saw an opening to draw my katana, it would easily dodge my attack. It was just a guess, but it had probably attuned itself to my mana manipulation.

But this made me recognize something. My Sword-Drawing Arts were so powerful that even the White Weretiger thought they were more than it could handle.

“Nanami.”

“Leave it to me, Master.”

When I glanced over to Nanami, she nodded and loosed her shot.

It was funny, really. I hadn’t actually told her anything. Yet somehow, I got the feeling that I had clearly gotten across my intentions to Nanami, who went on the offensive to put my plans into action.

The beast appeared to have deemed duking it out with me too risky. The White Weretiger pounced to the side and made to charge down Nanami. However—

“I’m definitely not letting you get away with that!”

I wasn’t going to allow it to get to her. Turning toward its flank, I drew my katana. Then I threw punches with my Third and Fourth Hands at the retreating tiger while slashing at it with my sword.

The White Weretiger didn’t seem to show as much caution toward my normal sword slashes in comparison to my Sword-Drawing Arts. They probably wouldn’t have much of an effect.

Instead, it ignored me and went running toward Nanami.

“Nanami!”

Calling out to her was enough. She managed to rotate her position behind me, which saved me from needing to move too drastically.

While I hadn’t changed position much, it was enough to make the White Weretiger come biting down on me as I once again blocked its way to Nanami.

As I watched its looming white fangs and splattering drool, a strange sensation came over me.

The monster’s attack was moving in slow motion. Drool flowing down its teeth formed a single thread, and I could clearly see the disgusting droplets flying toward me. I knew for sure that its sharp fangs were trained at my stomach.

I suddenly remembered the battle against the ogre.

It had been the same with Ludie. What exactly was this mid-combat phenomenon? It had never once occurred during my mock battles with Claris or Yukine, only manifesting during standoffs against powerful foes.

The Adrenaline Rush skill? Takioto had indeed been able to learn it.

If that was the case, something was wrong. Adrenaline Rush shouldn’t have activated unless I’d taken damage. What, then, was this ability, and what was triggering it? Maybe it was a skill that went off when another person was in danger? I’d never heard of anything like it.

If that was the case, then what a fantastic skill indeed. A power wielded to protect someone you love with all your heart—what a wonderful skill.

The White Weretiger's blows no longer frightened me. I rammed my Third Hand into its head, walloping it on the side of its face.

Then, as it tried to escape, Nanami's arrow directly connected with its stomach.

A thunderous concussive sound accompanied its body going rigid from the Explosive Arrow. While I would have liked to see it go flying, the beast endured the hit. With its enhanced body, it wouldn't go down easily. But Nanami's maneuver had been enough to leave the White Weretiger defenseless before me.

I had been waiting for this moment the whole time.

Sword-Drawing Arts—Flash—

The mana gathered in my sheath exploded, turning the blade to light.

It disappeared in the blink of an eye.

As I returned my katana to its sheath, the White Weretiger's body slid apart. I turned my back on it and walked toward Nanami as she ran toward me. Catching her leaping into my arms, I twirled her around to dampen the momentum of her jump. After spinning for a moment, Nanami placed her feet on the ground and looked at me, the same as always.

"This is what happens when you come at Master and me, you know," she stated to the vanquished monster, as if it was the most obvious fact in the world.





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The boss slain, I looked around where we had ended up and couldn't shake a feeling of unease.

If I stopped and thought about it, it made sense, really.

After all, this was an eroge world. Not just any eroge, but *Magical ★ Explorer* at that.

Try remembering what had happened after the last big boss battle. Go ahead and consider what we eroge players were really after. It was pretty obvious.

At the end of our path, in both a fortunate and unfortunate turn of events, there was an area exactly like the fapnace I had seen in a prior dungeon. Not a furnace, mind you, but a fapnace.

In front of it was something resembling a spatial magic circle, and seeing it empty of mana made my bad hunch grow more intense.

Ignoring everything else, I headed straight for the inscription. Unfortunately, neither touching it nor passing mana through it produced the slightest response.

What the hell? Nothing but déjà vu here. Was I getting screwed with?

“Master, there’s a treasure chest over here.”

Welp, now my bad hunch had been replaced with absolute conviction. *Magical ★ Explorer*, fapnace, treasure chest. The royal flush. Still, there was nothing else I could do. I went over to Nanami and put my hand on the box.

“I reeeally don’t want to open this... Nope, not one bit... I don’t want to open this, Nanami.”

She seemed puzzled by my reaction. I wasn’t surprised. Normally, a treasure chest without any traps would be something to get excited about. Not only that, but it would typically contain a fantastic reward if it followed a boss.

Though this actually would be a reward, in a way...if I were *playing* an eroge, dammit!

Well, I didn’t want to open it, but I had to. As long as the spatial magic circle remained inactive, we wouldn’t be able to get out of here.

“A-all right, let’s take a look.”

I took a deep breath and slowly lifted up the lid of the box. This was bad. All this tension was making my hands tremble. *Calm down, calm down and open it up slowly...*

When I lifted up the lid, my eyes first landed on something black, long, and slender.

Yup, it was something I'd seen in eroge, in fantasy settings, and in real life. People wielded this item to attack monsters in fantasy settings, and that held true for eroge and in real life, to some extent. But in fantasy stories, it was mainly used on monsters. In eroge and real life, on the other hand, the item was mainly used on people. Oh, though I suppose it was used on horses in real life, too. I gently closed the treasure chest.

"Now, I wonder why there's a whip in here, huh...?"

Actually, if this were a normal treasure chest, I would know. I'd simply think, *Oh gee, I guess there's a whip weapon in here!* However. We were at a fapnace.

I was totally lost. A whip. Seriously? A whip, huh? What were they for anyway? I really had no idea, ha-ha-haaa (I was avoiding reality).

Nanami opened the box. Then, taking the various flavors of whips out of the chest, she picked up the paper sitting beside them.

The words on the paper were written in an ancient language. Naturally, it was one she could read.

For some reason, however, the further into the paper she read, the more she started to grimace. Scratch that, I knew all too well why she was making that face.

Then, suddenly tossing the sheet aside, she frantically reached into the treasure chest. She produced a black leotard with what appeared to be a pair of devil wings. My guess was the design was going for a succubus kind of look?

Yeah. That was enough to figure out the rest.

"Master."

I heard Nanami's quivering voice. "Master is a human, and Miss Ludie is an elf, yes? Now, do you know what my race is?"

"A-angel, right?"

"Perfect answer, Master. Now then, what would this be?"

"A, uh, rather t-titillating...devil outfit?"

"Another perfect answer. Very good, Master. I knew I could count on you. Well, if what is written on that paper is correct, I need to put this costume on."

Yeah, I figured as much. I had no idea what was written on that paper, mind you. With a treasure chest in front of a fapnace containing a sexy outfit inside, though, that was obviously where this

was going.

“Are you saying that as an angel, it’d be bad for you to wear that or something?”

“No, if it was simply about wearing clothes, there would be no problem. But showing this much skin will send my pure looks crashing down from heaven. You realize this, right? Just what is going on here? This can’t be real.”

“Unfortunately, you aren’t dreaming. By the way, what else did that sheet say?”

“In addition to wearing this outfit, I need to hit an object with the whip to send mana from the furnace to the spatial magic circle.”

“I—I see.”

The person who thought up this mechanism had the mind of a devil. Building up special mana by having a girl dressed in sexy devil cosplay whip an object was inconceivable to anyone with a normal brain. Were they insane?

Glancing around the area, I saw the items lined up together. Judging from the magic circle below them, I assumed that was where she was supposed to stand and swing her whip.

Still, though, building up mana by dressing up and wielding a lash, huh?

In the world of a standard eroge, I figured things would end there. However, was this really all there was to it? This was *Magical ★ Explorer*, which always shoved in an extra level of absurdity into their scenes that their competitors could never hope to compare to. I had a hard time believing this was truly all that was in store for us.

“Master, I have terrible news!”

Nanami was scrounging through the box when she looked at me and shouted. See, she had found *something*.

Hold on, though— Why did she look a little amused?

“There’s a male outfit at the bottom of the chest!”

Nope, nuh-uh, no way, can’t be, don’t believe it.

Hold on just a minute here; this was clearly nutso.

First of all, let’s get one thing straight—what exactly did people want from eroge and other romance simulation games?

Beautiful girls. Scenes with beautiful girls acting adorable, scenes with them looking cool, and scenes with them getting hot and steamy. Even a certain percentage of the players who insisted, “Oh, I don’t even care about the sex scenes or whatever” were absolutely overjoyed they were in there! Damn grumpy perverts! I had been like that, though. And if you asked me whether I would prefer to have them or not, I was going to say I wanted them, dumbass!

Indeed, a majority of erogé players longed for them. That was why the game developers really couldn't afford to give anything less than their very best.

However. No matter how you looked at it, there was absolutely no way any of the users would want a man to dress up, was there?!

"Yes. I thought I would have to sacrifice myself for the cause, but it's truly unfortunate. You'll have to wear this, too, Master... ♪"

I took the outfit she was holding. The costume was indeed for men.

"Wait just a second, and what the hell am I supposed to do after I put this on anyway?!"

Next, Nanami offered me one of the whips. *Aaaargh, fine, fine, I get it already!*

"This whole thing is ridiculous on a fundamental level, right?! Why the hell does wearing these clothes and smacking something with a whip make mana build up in the magic circle anyway?"

Now that I thought about it, I recalled that in an interview, one of the developers stated: "We came up with this really amusing scene, but we figured our players weren't looking for that sort of thing, so we scrapped it." Was this dungeon maybe what they were talking about?! Damn right that'd get scrapped. If I were the game director, I would have torn the proposal up and tossed it out the window. Who the hell would even need a scene like this?!

The only saving grace was that it wasn't as revealing as Nanami's outfit. Well, either way, my only response to that slight upside was a resounding, *So what?*

"Dammit."

I tossed the outfit away and took the whip in my hand, cursing all the while.

"This stupid thing broken or something?!"

Standing over the magic circle, I whacked the object with my riding crop. Yet nothing happened.

Yeah, I knew it already. It wasn't actually broken. It was just that this world's whole premise itself was completely deranged!

"Daaaaaaaammiiiiit!"

If this was how it was going to be, maybe I should make Nanami do it all herself? No, there was no way I could do that. I couldn't give her the short end of the stick when I was capable of helping, too.

With that in mind, I had no choice but to put the outfit on.

"Oopsie...Nanami's fallen from heaven. ★"

"You know, for all that complaining you were doing, you don't seem too upset by all this."

Although my getup wasn't as revealing as hers, it made it seem like

I'd come down with a case of edgelord disease, which was depressing just to think about.

"Huh? Where in the world would you get that idea? Just look at how distressed I am."

She heaved a small sigh, ignoring my statement with a nonchalant expression on her face. Then, glancing at me, she started bending down, grabbing the wings growing from her waist and curtsying, propping her chest up with her arms, turning around to glance back at me, and doing other such poses.

"Fallen Angel Nanami...makes her big debut."

"Actually, you're really into this, aren't you? Why else would you be flaunting these poses?"

The position where she showed me her armpits and the one where she pulled her tights up while sitting down were real critical hits for me, so I would have definitely enjoyed seeing them again.

"Come now, Master, over here, over here."

"Wait, I'm doing this, too?"

"Put your arm more like this, like you're holding me up, and open your legs just a bit more and move to the right. Then move over here and, right here at the end, make a cool victory pose."

"You seriously want me to do this...?"

"I feel my mood changing. I might even go on strike. A *strike*! Not those stripes you sometimes see on panties, a *strike*. Now, let's go."

"Maybe it's less that you're into it and more that you're losing your mind? You're saying some bizarre stuff."

"Fallen Angel Nanami...makes her big debut. ★"

"Big debut... ★ You can't help yourself with that, can you? But honestly, there's too much to even riff on here. I can't do it."

"Tee-hee, well, it hardly needs saying, but *I* think you look good, Master."

Why she told me this in a condescending tone, the world may never know.

"...Thanks, but it's kind of breezy. In a bad way."

"I believe its defenses are quite high, though."

"High stats or not, when it looks like this, well..."

It did seem to offer a considerable amount of protection. Nevertheless, the appearance itself would prevent me from using it on the regular.

"All right, let's wrap this up quick and get outta here."

"Let us. Now then, Master, there are three types of whips here. Which one would you prefer?"

"I would have never thought I'd end up in a place like this, worrying about what sort of whip I wanted to use, that's for sure."

There were three types of lashes laid out before me.

A flogger with its tip split apart into several individual strands, a very standard bullwhip like the ones used in role-playing games and comics, and a riding crop painful enough to inflict damage through a horse's tough hide.

"If all we're doing is hitting something, this riding crop seems like the easiest to use," I remarked, giving it a few practice swings.

Fwish. Fwish. Fwish.

"*Angh!* Noooo! Not there!"

"Hey, how about you stop making weird poses and moaning in time with my practice swings?"

"My apologies. In that case, I will go with the simple option," Nanami replied, picking up the bullwhip. Raising it up, she started smacking it against the ground with a loud *crack*. Now that I thought about it, she was proficient with almost every weapon, so she was probably pretty skilled with the lash, too.

"Heh-heh-heh."

"And what are you laughing about?"

Watching her crack her whip in her devil outfit with a faint smile on her face—honestly, the scene fit her *too* well.

"Now then, Master, shall we begin?"

"Yeah, let's do this."

We both reached our designated positions, and Nanami began passing mana through the magic circle on the ground. At this, some kind of digital display popped up in front of her. Next, the emblem at my feet began to glow, and another such display projected in front of me.

I couldn't read the ancient characters on the screen, but I could guess what we needed to do from the pictures.

In all likelihood, we would need to smack the objects with our whips the moment the lash icons descended onto a marker at the bottom of the screen.

A rhythm game?

When I glanced at Nanami, she picked up on my questions and informed me of what was written on the screen.

"If we whip the objects when the line and whip symbols overlap, it apparently makes it easier to build up mana. If we are off by an extensive amount, then the mana will decrease instead."

It was a rhythm game. Were they aiming to become *Whip no Tatsujin*? Or maybe *Bust'n Music*? Why did the titles all end up so horny...?!

Nodding, I whacked the object in front of me with my whip for the time being. I wondered why exactly this object's shape was trying to call to mind the human form so much...

Ba-da-ching!

Hearing a mysterious sound echo around the room, Nanami and I exchanged looks.

“It appears to be a warning message..... Huh?”

“What’s wrong, Nanami?”

She shook her head and rubbed her eyes before staring at the display, frozen.

I had only the *worst* feelings about this next information.

“O-oh no, my apologies. I seem to be hallucinating right now.”

“While I hate to say it, take a good look at our outfits and what’s in our hands. We aren’t hallucinating. This is reality.”

We were in the world of erogé, after all. Here, what seemed to be utter fantasy was in fact real—far too real, actually.

Although hesitant and bewildered, Nanami slowly began to speak.

“Um, it says if we make three mistakes.....a lubricant that puts you in a naughty mood will come shooting out.”

It took me some time to digest her words.

“A whaaaaat?! You can’t be serious. It’s just a joke, right? Tell me you’re just fooling with me!”

This is beyond normal human comprehension, right? That’s some erogé shit! Damn this horny wooworld!

“P-please, Master, worry not. Why, this aphrodisiac has a beautifying effect, giving your skin a glossy shine, and on top of long-term moisture retention, its sun-blocking—”

“Like I care about any of that! This stuff gives me plenty to worry about!”

“Y-you make a good point there.”

This was bad. I felt like I had done this same back-and-forth before. Though the roles had been switched now.

Calm down. I just need to calm down...!

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to take it out on you when none of this is your fault.”

“Please, I can understand where your feelings are coming from. I don’t mind at all.”

Nanami struck the object with her whip, and the screen switched over.

This time, a woman and camera icon floated onto the screen. Just as before, an explanation in the ancient language accompanied them.

“Now what’s it say?”

“...‘Whenever you fail, the moment will be captured in a photo so that you will have a lifelong memory to enjoy’ is what it says.”

What was that supposed to mean? It was going to preserve our *dark and terrible history* in a snapshot?

“It seems that a single picture costs one sigil stone.”

“Where are we, an amusement park?! Why the hell is it going on

about commemorative photos?!”

Take a moment to imagine it: A photoshoot of a man and woman in devil costumes hitting things with whips—that was the very definition of a dark moment from the past I never wanted to remember again. While we were drenched in lube, on top of that? It was ridicul.....

.....Fallen Angel Nanami dripping in lube, you say?

“.....Master?”

I stared, stock-still, at the camera-looking apparatus. Right now, I was being forced into making the ultimate decision. For the price of a single low-level sigil stone, I could get my hands on the greatest treasure, one without any possible substitute. I could obtain something that no amount of money in the world could buy.

I-it was important to push oneself as much as possible, right? If you had your picture taken, it would feel like you had to succeed at all costs no matter what, right? But hey, you know, sometimes failure happened, and no one could really do anything about it.

“.....”

Nanami was staring at me with an exceedingly reproachful look in her eyes. I couldn’t blame her. Unbeknownst to me, my hand clutching the whip had become drenched with sweat.

Okay, just hold on a minute here. Why was I trying to make this choice without asking Nanami’s opinion? This problem didn’t only concern me. It was a problem for the both of us. In other words, if she wanted a picture of herself, then maybe there was a slim—

“.....”

—nope, no chance at all. My sincerest apologies. The more I thought about it, the picture would harm me, too, so it was best if we didn’t do it.

“Honestly... If it motivates you to do this, Master, then I suppose there’s no other choice.”

With these words, she selected the camera icon. Then she looked toward me with a smile.

“Just this one time, understand? Now, let’s get started.”

Who was this girl, an angel? Oh, right, she *was* one!

“Of course, I know I can trust you. You certainly wouldn’t make a mistake on purpose or anything horrible like that, so really, it doesn’t make a difference what I choose, does it?”

Now came the fallen angel!

This sly, smirking little maid, warning me like that—I couldn’t mess up after being complimented like that, could I?! Dammit, she’d definitely put it like that because she knew I would react this way!

“Now, let’s begin,” Nanami announced, striking the object with her whip and changing the display. Up-tempo music began playing, and

lash icons began descending toward the line on the bottom of the screen.

Ba-da-ching!

With both of our timings correct, a bar on the screen representing the total mana grew a little. After that, even with a few whip icons descending down, we were able to hit the objects without making any mistakes.

“Master, my deepest apologies. There is something I must tell you now.”

“Hmm?”

As of that moment, we hadn’t made any mistakes. As such, I really thought we were off to a good start, but then what was this sudden apology about?

“It appears that the whip I chose was a trap.”

“Huh?”

“I said my lash was a trap. Using this is far more difficult than I had imagined.”

Ba-da-ching!

“N-Nanami?”

“It’s impossible to strike multiple times in succession with this.”

Ah, I understood her now. Her lash was pretty long, after all. To be honest, it seemed hard enough to hit the target at the right time with it already. If anything, she had done a great job getting that far.

“Heeeeeeey! A-a-are you okay?!”

“I wonder how this lubricant will smell...”

“Why are smiling so contentedly as you say that?! Don’t give up on me now!”

Nevertheless, as we continued further and further along, the difficulty cruelly increased as well. For what it was worth, I thought she put up a great fight with that whip of hers.

From there, despite both Nanami and myself making one mistake each, we were able to continue on until the meter was almost completely filled.

Then, as we both whipped the objects in perfect unison, the once-blue meter sparkled with a rainbow of colors. We had reached the goal.

It had been a long and precipitous battle. Consumed with sentiment, I went to let go of my whip but found myself unable.

“All right...! Wait, umm?”

“Master, it seems it’s too early to celebrate. The music is still going!”
No. No, no, something was off here.

“Hold on, no, why’s it still going if we filled up our bar?!”

“Master, please calm down! Everything about this has been fishy

from the start. Anything could happen. If we mess up here, it'll be a wet and gooey time for us both."

"Dammit, so we gotta fight to the end of the song? The person who came up with this is such an idiot. If they're still alive out there somewhere, I'm gonna give them a good punch to the face."

We'd come all this way. There could be no more mistakes. We had also been keeping this whipping up for quite a while. Save for one of those multi-hour-long classical pieces, plenty of time had passed for a normal tune to start wrapping it up.

My guess was on the mark. The song's chorus section ended, and soon after, the music slowly began to fade.

The sound cut out a few seconds later. The whip icons stopped descending, and Nanami and I looked at each other.

She beamed with the brightest of smiles. We had gotten through it. We'd claimed victory over this surprise rhythm game! We'd beaten this crappy game!

We both threw our arms around each other.

"We did it!"

"We've done it, Master!"

Did you see that, game producers?! This was the power of Nanami and me together.

That's when it happened—a single whip icon dropped down the screen.

"“Uh-oh.””

Both of us said it at once.

As we watched it fall, a thought crossed my mind: *Rhythm games love to drop notes down right after the end of the song, don't they?*

Brr-brrrr.

Together with the sound, a magic circle formed right before our eyes. Even though the display clearly depicted that we had filled up our meter, the magic circle was still cruelly materializing in front of us.

However, I had planned for if things ended up this way.

I'd already considered what I was going to do. Or more accurately, I didn't even need to think about it and trusted that I would stick true to my convictions and act on reflex.

I grabbed Nanami with my Third Hand as she tried to stand out in front of me.

"Thank you, Nanami. You stay back."

"Master?!"

I was the only one who needed to face the shower. Flinging Nanami away, I spread my Fourth Hand open. If I fully unfolded my stole out in front of me, I might be able to defend myself. It was probably a slim sliver of hope. Nevertheless, I wouldn't know unless I tried.

Unfortunately, I had been too optimistic.

“Master! Above you!” Nanami cried after I flung her.

I immediately turned my sights to the air above. The magic circle floating overhead had already finished forming and was in the middle of pouring down on me. Faced with this, I couldn’t help but smile.

A contingency plan? That was seriously playing dirty. How badly did this place want to get us?

As I resigned myself and shut my eyes, the liquid showered down on me.

If asked how it felt, I would say it was like the cooling watery antiperspirants that were used during summer in Japan. It felt cold at first. That sensation quickly dissipated, though. Just as my whole body felt cool and refreshed, an exuberant heat began radiating inside me.

“*Urk.*”

To make matters worse, I was all slippery. Well, since it was lube, that was only a matter of course.

Thinking to get away, I barely walked a few steps before I slid off my feet. The area under me was slimy with lube. I stretched out my hands to try protecting my body from my fall. However, I felt no impact in my arms. Instead, the blow came to my body.

“Y-you idiot, what was the point in me protecting you now?” I barked at her.

I didn’t fall over. Nanami was clutching my body close. Her arms were wrapped around my waist.

“*Hngh...* Master’s suffering, is my, suffering, too. *Hnaah, haaah... Ngh.*”

Her gasping breaths were gradually getting warmer and warmer. My whole body was growing hotter and hotter, too.

“N-Nanami.”

I was overjoyed to hear her tell me that. Truly delighted. But you know, it didn’t make this any easier to bear. Besides, I desperately wanted to stay a gentleman, and I knew that Nanami trusted me to be one, too.

“I’ll use water magic. We’ll wash this all away.”

I really just had to grin and bear it, didn’t I? *Hey, Nanami, you know this situation right now? We call this purgatory.*

Actually, you’re smiling, aren’t you? You didn’t do this on purpose, did you? You’re letting out some real questionable voices right in my ear right now. Was this your plan all along?

Lightly washed off with Nanami’s water magic and changed back into our normal clothes, we entered the spatial magic circle.

Then we manifested in front of the entrance to the dungeon.

It was just before nightfall. The labyrinth's stone entrance was dyed crimson, and the crumbling stone pillars cast long shadows on the ground. Next to me, Nanami stood bathed in orange light, staring up at orange-tinged trees. The wind blowing aside the silver bangs that hung over her eyes, she let out a small sigh. I matched my gaze with hers.

It was a bit of a strange mood.

We had only just finished clearing a dungeon, where we had been prepared to fight to the death, yet here was this peaceful scenery.

"That was a hell of an adventure, huh...? Listen, Nanami. I'm gonna be real upset if you tell Ludie and the others what happened today, okay?"

"You need not even ask. They would be terribly worried if I told them, so I know it would be better for it to remain a secret. I do personally believe it would actually be best to inform them, though."

"You think so?"

"If I were in their shoes, I would certainly be angry. Enough to give a good whipping, I would say."

The two of us both turned to each other. Then we both smiled at the same time.

"Definitely can't tell them about our escape via whipping, that's for sure."

"Yes, it will be our secret. Just between you and me. A precious... precious secret."



CONFIG

When I stopped to think about it, it was obvious, really.

Regardless of how dangerous of an ordeal Nanami and I had been through, the Hanamura house was the picture of tranquility. Time passed there the same as always. When I asked Claris—who was sipping tea in an uncommon moment of inactivity—where Ludie was, she replied that she was in her room studying.

Since the first exams of the school year were fast approaching, that checked out. I was planning on skipping them anyway, so I'd forgotten all about them.

This academy was unique, after all, and it was possible to continue on to the next year of school so long as you could clear dungeons. That was why a non-zero number of students planned on skipping tests from the start.

Ludie, on the other hand, was a model student with everyday common sense. Though, really, any halfway normal person would put up with taking exams.

My practice swings and sparring with Claris finished, I collected my thoughts about my next moves during my shower.

I wanted to avoid going to Ludie's room. With the testing season approaching, Sis also looked busy, sort of? I occasionally had a hard time understanding her behavior, so it was possible she wasn't actually occupied.

In any event, since the person with the highest authority at the Academy was here, I figured I'd take the chance to lay the groundwork for various things down the line. She was almost always busy, so it would be a good idea to talk to her while I had the chance. It was time to spring into action.

After washing myself off, I immediately got changed and headed toward Marino's room. There, I found both her and Nanami.

"Perfect timing."

"Hmm?" Puzzled, I cocked my head to the side, before Marino presented me with a piece of paper. I immediately reached my hand out, taking the paper and sitting next to Nanami on the sofa.

"Let's see here, a marriage registration form, eh?Huh?"

“Oh dear, my mistake!”

“How do you even mix that up?” I replied as she took the first sheet and swapped it with another.

What the hell was something like that even doing here? I was pretty sure outside of a trip to city hall, or an eroge’s limited-edition goods, you couldn’t normally get one of those. I mean, it had very much looked like the real thing. Someone would definitely get the wrong idea if you handed it to them.

More importantly, I’m pretty sure I saw both Sis’s name and my own written on that form.....though I was probably just imagining things.

“This is the one.”

“Let’s see, a school enrollment form...right?”

“Please prepare one for everyone,” requested Nanami beside me. Surely she didn’t mean this enrollment form, did she?

Whatever the case, I briefly looked over the sheet and stared at the person who had their name listed on the paper.

After she said something to Marino, she sensed my gaze and turned to face me.

When our eyes met, Nanami abruptly put both of her hands to her cheeks and started wiggling her body.

“Master, please, we can’t do that here; it’s too embarrassing...!”

“Let’s cool it on the suggestive and easily misunderstood comments, okay?”

I hadn’t actually said anything, mind you. I wondered what I’d tried forcing her to do in those delusions of hers, though.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll act like I didn’t see a thing, ♪” Marino promised.

I don’t need that sort of consideration, thanks. When I turned back to Nanami, she was back to her usual self.

“Okay, so...can we get back to the topic at hand?”

“Yes, we actually just finished all the arrangements.”

“Finally, I will no longer need to converse with this old bat past her prime, and I will officially be able to attend school together with you. Now, Master, try not to be *too* excited.”

Where was Nanami’s vitriol toward Marino coming from, exactly? I would have to ask her later, I guess. More importantly—

“I guess if I had to come down one way or the other, I’d say I’m happy about it, but my situation at school is in a bit of a weird spot.”

Between my closeness with Ludie and me constantly skipping classes, my position at the Academy was fragile. And considering what I wanted to do next, I couldn’t deny that there was a possibility things would get even worse.

“Well, maybe it would help if you actually showed up to class,” Marino replied, chastising me with her eyes. She had hit the nail on

the head so perfectly I couldn't say anything back, but I figured my absences were only going to be more frequent from here on out. Especially in the period before exams. That wasn't important, though.

"Thinking about down the road, I think I'm fine with the way things are going, but I don't know if I want to purposely get Nanami wrapped up in it all... Although, I can't really predict how things are ultimately going to settle down."

"Down the road,' huh...? The Three Committees, perhaps?"

Marino's eyes twinkled ominously. A shrewd guess. She was spot-on.

"Well, whatever the case may be, I will not ever leave Master's side. No matter what those vermin say to me, I'll pay them no mind and simply exterminate them for it."

"I'm pretty sure once you start talking extermination, you're paying it a *lot* of mind."

"Well, setting the jokes aside for a moment, I really don't care what people say."

She did seem like she would stay loyal to me no matter what anyone said. However...

"Well, I also get the feeling you'd actually enjoy the situation, if anything. Why not?"

"Master, you know me so very well," continued Nanami, just as Marino interjected with a beckoning, "Hey, hey."

"So, Kousuke. If you don't mind, would you fill me in on what you're thinking of doing?"

Right, I had come here to lay groundwork and prevent any sort of worst-case scenario.

"Actually, I came over here to talk to you about exactly that. What I'm trying to do is simple, really."

Well, the reality was that I was only trying to grow stronger, and what I was going to talk to her about was a by-product of that. Still, it would make a strong impact, so I prioritized bringing it up first. Given the opportunity, I might as well boast about it, too.

Holding up my pointer finger, I grinned.

"I was thinking I'd skip my exams and take the top spot in my class."

—Nanami's Perspective—

Master was regarded as an underachiever at school.

The piercing glares people threw his way made that abundantly clear. When I inquired about this further, his explanation was very simple. The root of their ire stemmed from his intimacy with Miss Ludie, and his bad grades made everything worse.

Miss Ludie was truly very incensed about this state of affairs. Although she also wanted to take some action herself, she understood

that a wrong move would come back to harm Master. Since he hadn't been letting it get to him, she hadn't done anything significant.

Miss Ludie wasn't the only one concerned about Master. Miss Yukine, Miss Hatsumi, Miss Claris—he had many different people fretting over his current situation.

“Master. Saying bad things behind others' backs is all these ignoble worms can muster. Their stares are quite pleasant.”

“Don't call any of the normal students that to their faces, got it?”

Of course, I had no intention of doing so, but I replied with an exaggerated “Well, I suppose, if you say so” regardless. It took all I had to stop myself from smiling when I saw how uneasy that made him.

“Well, I think I've shown you all the most important spots at this point.”

“Thank you, Master. However, I do not wish to stray from your side for a single moment, so I shall be sure to move around school with you,” I told him, making a big display of hugging his arm tight. As I rubbed his arm against my body and took in his scent, I felt the glares around us grow even more intense.

With the steadfast support of his friends, Master would have a bright future ahead of him. If there was anything that concerned me, however, it was that woman.

While I did not think it was anything serious, a small possibility remained that it was. Knowing Master, I was sure he would brush it off with a wince and say, *It is what it is*. It absolutely was not.

However, judging solely from our exchanges, she did not seem to be an enemy. She'd sworn that she was on his side and that she wouldn't go against his interests. Above all else, she made her affection for Master very clear. That was precisely what made her seem so safe.

Yet her existence was far removed from the average human's. What in the world was she doing in a place like this? In fact, something was off about this whole area. I couldn't find any other instances within my knowledge bases, either.

She said she would discuss things with Master eventually, but that was still far in the future.

However, I needed to make sure that the mere possibility of things turning pear-shaped didn't affect him. I had to be wary of her.

Wary of the principal of Tsukuyomi Magic Academy, Marino Hanamura.

“Okay, let's meet up with Ludie and head back. Does something feel off to you?”

I nodded at his words. It had made me curious, too. Gradually, there were fewer and fewer stares aimed our way. As though they had all

found something even more interesting to look at.

Judging by the brooches and tie pins on their clothes, the main group of boys and girls looking away from us consisted of second- and third-years.

“Scatter, be gone. Out of my way. I cannot get through.”

“Shion, stop. You’re always ruining the mood like that. Actually, all the Ceremonial Committee members do.”

When Master and I glanced over to see what was happening, we saw a girl wearing a purple kimono and a girl with glasses.

“What, is it not best to speak clearly? Gathering here has put them in my way.”

“I’m saying that if you talk to them like normal, they’ll understand. There’s no need to be so hostile.”

The girl adjusted her glasses and scowled.

“Nanami, I don’t know why, but some very interesting people have shown up.”

Master smiled, enjoying himself.

“Those girls are members of the Three Committees—and joining them is one of my objectives. They’re chock-full of powerful students, all the way up to the three presidents.”

Taking notice of our stares, the two members who’d drawn the attention from us turned our way.

“Oh, well now, who is it but Yukine’s little pet? I must say, things have gotten *quite* interesting, haven’t they now?”

“Is this the one...? Who the president is so curious about?”

Master shrugged his shoulders.

“I certainly didn’t expect to have the honor of meeting you both today, Ceremonial Committee Vice-Minister Shion Himemiya and Student Council Vice President Franziska Edda von Gneisenau.”

“Oh, you know who I am? Well, I do suppose that is to be expected.”

“Putting myself aside, I’m surprised you know Shion here, too.”

“Now, Fran, are you trying to provoke me? I’ll gladly oblige.”

I’d heard the student council and the Ceremonial Committee were on bad terms, and that indeed appeared to be the case.

“By my calculations, I have a nearly one hundred percent chance of winning, so it’d be a waste of time.”

“My, is that so, now? Hmm? What are you all doing, then? We’re not putting on a show here, so begone!”

A dark magic circle emerged in front of Shion Himemiya. However, Franziska immediately erased it with her hand.

The onlookers scattered after realizing the danger the pair posed, leaving only the four of us behind.

“Kousuke Takioto, and, um, you are...?” the girl with the glasses

nervously inquired, looking at me. Her eyes focused on my maid outfit; it appeared she couldn't help but voice her curiosity.

"It's a maid uniform."

Franziska's eyes were spinning in confusion as she mumbled, "We're still at school, right...?" In contrast, Shion Himemiya laughed. If some people were coming to class dressed in a kimono, then being in a maid uniform shouldn't have been a problem. Even that old bat Marino had told me it was fine.

Besides, Master was chuckling quietly at the scene before him, so evidently, throwing in a few jokes was okay.

Looking at them both, I whispered in Master's ear.

"Master, are these two girls new marriage candidates?"

"Of course not. Just who do you take me for anyway...?" he replied, but I wondered if he was being truthful or not.

"My apologies. I will set aside the jests for now."

In the end, nothing I planned on doing would change, no matter how many more marriage candidates showed up. Nor would their arrivals do anything to shake my dominant position.

I was a Maid-Knight and an angel. Master and I had formed a contract for just the two of us. It was, in certain respects, a one-sided agreement. Nevertheless, it was something that I shared with him and him alone. And rest assured, no one else would lay their hands on it.

Work in dungeons, die in dungeons. That was my lot as a Maid-Knight. But Master had tried to grant me freedom.

That was why I was going to live free.

And since I could do as I pleased, I would stay at his side.

I liked bantering with him. Whenever I would say something offhand enough to make myself laugh, he would never fail to respond with a delightful retort that made my heart feel full.

I liked taking care of Master. I was happy simply being together with him.

I had no intentions of yielding my place or my role as his maid. I would dedicate my everything to him. I *wanted* to dedicate my everything. If he truly wished to become the strongest in the world, then I would support him in that venture. I would support Master, who was always too concerned with others, always too quick to sacrifice himself for their sake.

I grabbed my skirt and bowed.

I had no intention of surrendering my post to anyone else. I would be there to support Master at his side. Even if more marriage candidates appeared, that would not change. No matter how strong they may be, I would not concede my place beside him.

This was where I belonged.

“I am the stunningly beautiful maid Nanami, and I am serving my master as he becomes the strongest in the world. I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”





CONFIG

Afterword

Magical★Explorer

Reborn as a Side Character in a Fantasy Dating Sim

Good day, Iris here.

—Acknowledgments—

Noboru Kannatuki, for continuing your wonderful illustration work from Volume 1. You have my deepest thanks. A few characters changed a bit from their web novel versions, which I imagine caused some confusion, so I apologize for that.

For the audio drama, Nobunaga Shimazaki, M · A · O, the audio crew, and everyone else involved in the production of a truly fantastic piece of work: Thank you very much. I would especially like to express my gratitude to the two voice actors, who agreed to lend their performances to a series with such a suspiciously lowbrow premise.

To the Navel staff on the *Shuffle!* collaboration, and to Aoi Nishimata, who provided an illustration for Volume 1's release: I am deeply moved to have the opportunity to become involved with one of the eroge works that launched my love for the genre. Thank you very much.

A big thanks as well to Shintaro for your supporting illustration of Ludie—she looks so adorable that it's impossible not to look at her without a huge grin on your face.

To my editor, Miyakawa: I caused you an enormous amount of trouble on this volume. Thank you, and forgive me. Next time, with all the awesome page-turning stuff I'm adding, I anticipate a large amount of revisions. Hmm? Page counts...? Why, whatever could you mean (blank stare)?

Finally, to all of you who purchased this book and to everyone who has supported this series:

I truly thank you from the bottom of my heart.

—Preview and Announcements—

It's at last time for a certain scene to come in Volume 3. That's right, the one that grabbed the top of the daily rankings on the web novel website, scoring so many points that I'd thought I was dreaming. *That* scene.

I'm going to punch it up and make it tens of times better before presenting it to you again. I plan on adding an episode with Yukine Mizumori. I'm thinking of an extra story that will convert people who aren't fans of her into fans and that will make her current devotees fall even more in love with her. I hope you'll enjoy it. Just please don't say anything about page counts, I'm begging you.

Also, the plans for the manga adaption by Yukari Higa are moving along nicely. I hope you'll support it as well!

Iris

I hope you'll continue enjoying
Hajime no Isekai!





[illegible]



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